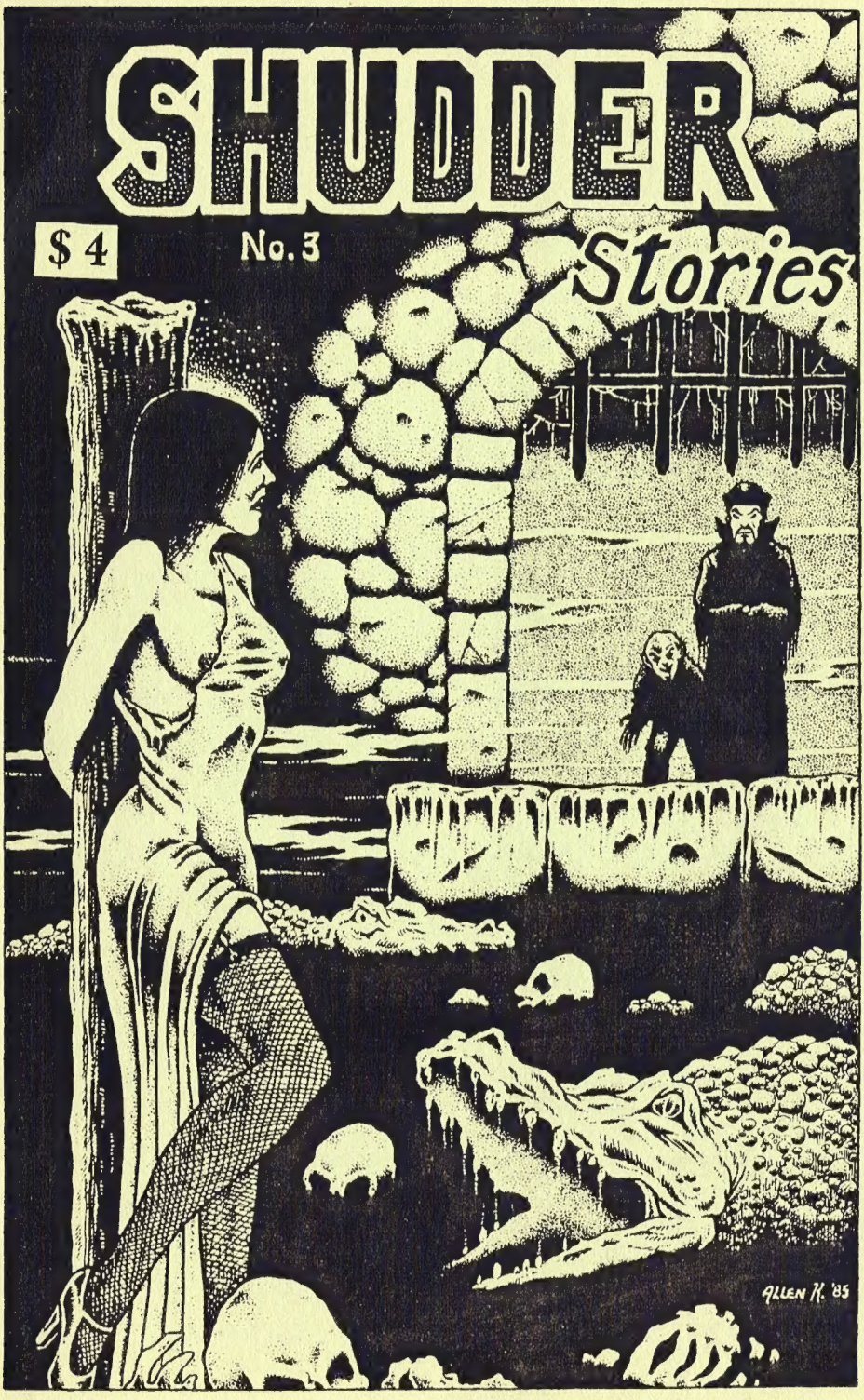
SHUDDER
Stories
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No. 3
ALLEN H. '85

SHUDDER STORIES

April 1985 * Number Three

CONTENTS

From the Secret Chamber. 2
by Robert M. Price

The Gallery of the Goddesses 3
by Robert Kenneth Jones

The Hand of Every. 18
by Carl Jacobi

Damsels for the Damned 28
by Hugh B. Cave

Menacing Mail. 44

From the Secret Chamber

Return with us now to those depraved days of wood-pulp perversion, when editors, writers, and cover artists vied with each other like the hooded fiends depicted on the covers to inflict ever new and more implausible torments upon the literary senses of their readers who, masochists that they were, lapped it up and begged for more. Yes, it's weird menace time, and we bring you a new and characteristically lurid issue of *Shudder Stories!*

That leering fellow in the monk's robe holding the hot poker—you say he looks familiar, but you're surprised to see him here? Well, no wonder: that's Robert Kenneth Jones, author of the definitive study of the weird menace genre, *The Shudder Pulps.* But what's he doing here? Jones has succumbed; how long did you think he could be exposed to that stuff without being affected by it? Yes, he's sunk to actually *writing* terror tales, and here's his first one: "The Gallery of the Goddesses". We figured, look, who's better acquainted with the feel of the genre than he?

Unless of course it's that white-coated guy just behind him, wearing bottle-thick glasses and wielding a wicked-looking hypodermic needle.... Right the first time! Carl Jacobi! Watch out, because he's ready to inject you with a blood-curdling dose of fright entitled "The Hand of Every". If you start feeling the proverbial "icy fingers of fear" up your spine while reading this story, you might better take a fast look over your shoulder!

And watch out for that tittering fellow hunched over the torture rack over there! Can it be Hugh B. Cave, that master of malicious menace? You bet, and he's back with "Damsels for the Damned", another contemporary classic that will have you silly sadists chortling with delight!

Well, that's it! Another fear-fest guaranteed to leave no stomach unturned! Until next issue, that's all from your editor's Secret Chamber.

Robert M. Price

The Gallery of the Goddesses

by Robert Kenneth Jones

What dreadful impulse led us to that dreary, dingy art studio, almost hidden from the stores and the businesses along that quiet, out-of-the-way street, I don't know. Certain it is that if we hadn't taken that fateful direction, the doom that was to blight our lives would have been nothing more than an intangible fancy, powerless to do us harm. But we took the irrevocable turn. . . .

"Oh, look, Mark." Joan clutched my arm. "Isn't this quaint?" She had stepped in front of a grimy window that looked anything but intriguing to me, and peered in. I looked too; old paintings in massive frames could be seen in the dim light within. "Let's go in." An artist herself, Joan delighted in exploring old musty galleries, rubbing shoulders with old friends, as she said. She pulled me into a gloomy room that was so quiet after the busy street that I found myself holding my breath. The paintings in ornate frames, of scenes and figures of a bygone era, added to the oppressive atmosphere. There was a mustiness to the room; if I moved quickly, clouds of dust would rise up and choke me, I felt. I wanted to smile at the delusion, but an uncomfortable feeling made me apprehensive. Then with a shock, I became aware of a hunched figure in the corner, bent over an easel, silently painting under a shaded lamp. It paid no attention to us.

"Not very prepossessing," I said. I found myself speaking in a whisper; I tried to shrug off the uneasy feeling. "I certainly don't expect they

go in for abstractions here." My attempt at light-heartedness sounded false.

"Well, you know I don't have your modern tastes," Joan replied, "even if I do have a taste for someone modern like you." Her attempt at jocularity sounded as strained as mine. Just then, the figure turned to look at us. Slowly, it rose and came toward us. The steps were slow and measured. I had an impression of a gaunt form, then my eyes were drawn to a strange visage. The nose was hooked and extremely thin; the mouth was nothing more than a slit, the lips bloodless, the face deathly pale. But the eyes . . . I had never seen eyes so deep-sunken. Red-rimmed, as if inflamed, they were buried within the parchment-like skull, unwinking as a basilisk. Somehow, when I had first espied this strange individual, I had felt a repugnance, even though it was nothing more than an indistinct impression caused by an indeterminate shadow at first sight. Now, seen more clearly, he reminded me of a vulture, and I instinctively stepped back as he approached.

A rasping voice asked, "Is—there—something—you—would—like?" The accent sounded foreign, and the words were spoken slowly and tonelessly, a vocal evocation of the strangely methodical movements that animated the stooped frame. Neither Joan nor I said anything; we were both nonplussed by this weird personage. "Is—t h e r e—something—you—would—like?" he repeated. Finally, I shook my head and mumbled something about just looking around. Without another word, the man turned about and with the same deliberate and painstaking tread went back to his easel.

"Look, let's leave," I said to Joan in a low voice. "There's nothing here you want. There's something unsavory about that guy."

She demurred. "No, not just yet. I'd like to see what he's doing, now that we're here." Joan Westin was a very resolute young lady, as I had quickly learned when first making her acquaintance. She was quite high-principled, and did not give in when she felt she was right. In fact, it was this firmness of character that first attracted me to her, and convinced me she was someone I wanted to spend my life with. Now, I wanted to convince her of the same thing. It didn't take us long to realize we liked each other, even though our tastes in art were dissimilar. Being a real estate attorney, I wanted something to take my mind off cut-and-dried facts and figures, something to pull me away from my structured existence, when I relaxed. I found in abstract art a soothing sense of freedom and restfulness. Joan, however, liked traditional paintings; in fact, the earlier the better, and in a short time had become an authority in early Italian art. But this slight difference aside, we found so many common interests, and grew so close to each other, that now we were together much of the time.

Joan had moved over closer to observe the artist. In the eerie stillness, the only sound was the faint friction of brush over canvas. I noted that he was copying a painting from a color plate. He worked rapidly and surely, oddly at variance with his previous laborious actions. I could see that the copy was amazingly true to the original—a scene of nude figures in the style of several centuries past. The old man didn't pay any attention to us; he was engrossed in his work. Joan was gazing raptly at his deft efforts. At one moment, she leaned forward as if about to say something, then drew back. I tugged on her arm and reluctantly she allowed me to pull her away. As we moved back, the figure turned and a burning look blazed at Joan. With her luxuriant blond hair and stunning figure, she always attracted attention, and I felt proudly possessive when we went out together. But the attentions of this gaunt-visaged vulture made me shudder. Was he covet-

ing her? I could detect no emotion whatever in his stony stare, just a silent appraisal. Then he returned to his painting. We left.

On the street again, I realized I had been holding my breath for some time, as I exhaled with relief. Joan was quite excited. "That was amazing," she blurted out. "Did you see what he was doing?" I waited in puzzlement. "You probably didn't recognize the Titian, did you? A mythological scene of his—Diana and Callisto . . . a marvelous painting . . . wonderful technique—I mean, that copy he was doing. Why, it looked just like the original. Can you believe it? The same form and perspective, the same subtle coloration. That old man is a master himself!" The technique had been good; I had recognized that. "His copy even looked centuries old!" Her eyes glowed as she enthused over the occurrence.

"But what the devil is the point of all that?" I wondered. "Is a copy of an old master worth anything? People don't buy copies, do they?"

"No, there would be no demand for such a painting," Joan admitted. "But that talent—I've never seen anyone able to copy a style so perfectly." We had proceeded to the end of the block when she stopped me with, "Oh, I'll have to go back there and see what else he's done."

"What? Now?" I asked incredulously. "You don't mean right now?"

"No, of course not. I mean, sometime soon." She paused. "That place sort of fascinates me, in some way. It's like something out of the past."

Her remarks angered me; she knew I disliked the studio. "Now look, Joan, I don't want you poking your nose in that unwholesome place. And I certainly didn't like the way that old man looked at you."

"Don't be silly." She laughed; was there a shrill note to it? She pursed her lips the way she did whenever she had made up her mind about something. "Anyway, I think I will stop back, just for a look around. How can that hurt?"

If only I had been more insistent, if I could, somehow, have prevented her from returning. After all, it was just a whim on her part. But the more I would have argued against it, the more persistent she would have become. I realized that and didn't say any more. Yet possibly I might have forestalled her in some way. I had a premonition that I should. If I had followed it and made her change her mind, we would have avoided the evil catastrophe that overtook us. But at the time, there was no way of knowing that terror would grasp us in an icy hand and bring down on us the torments of the damned.

The next day, a short news item in the paper caught my eye. I didn't pay much attention to it, except that it reminded me of something. A young woman had been reported missing. A search of her apartment showed no evidence of violence. She had left her office the evening before, after working late, and was not seen again. There was nothing to be inferred from the story, except that it disturbed me. So many people disappear; it's not a rare occurrence. Then I recalled that about six months earlier, there was a similar report. At that time, an editorial in the paper had commented on the fact that several women had vanished in the city during the year, and called for better police results in solving these crimes. Was this one linked to those? What if Joan were to disappear? The thought was a vagrant one. After all, she wasn't in any danger. I dismissed from my mind the thought of black cars following her about. Why, we would be married soon, if I had my way, and then I could protect her and keep her near me, despite her willfulness.

Later that week, while dining together, Joan said she had some news for me. I had a suspicion what she

was going to say. Somewhat apologetically, she confirmed my worry: "I went back again to that studio. The old man had finished the copy of the Titian, I'm sure, since he was doing something else. And you know what?" I could only shake my head as I dully listened. Why shouldn't Joan visit there? Why did I feel so nervous? Surely, there was nothing wrong in watching him painting, even though he was a repellent individual. Joan continued, "He had started another mythological scene, and this time, it was a Raphael. In one of Raphael's frescoes there is a depiction of Juno, and that's what he was recreating. He's a genius," she asserted. "It's almost uncanny, the way he captures the nuances of the old masters. You can tell when you compare both paintings side by side." I tried to blunt her enthusiasm, to downgrade the event, and convince her she was wasting her time. But I only upset her. "Well, really, Mark; I'm hardly imagining things, you know. Besides, I can go where I want to," she snapped. We both felt an edge of irritation the rest of the evening.

Joan phoned me at my office the next afternoon and apologized for her temper. I told her there was nothing to forgive, and that I was simply concerned for her, and we were once again in tune. Then just as quickly, my spirits sank, at the disquieting statement she made. "It was probably just my imagination last night, but something happened which worried me. I was in town shopping and on my way home noticed an old black automobile behind me. You don't see many black cars these days, and that's why I remembered it as I was driving along. It stayed behind me," she explained, "and I was only half aware of it till I crossed an intersection as the light went red. Then it speeded up and ran the light, then slowed down behind me again. It stayed right behind me."

"What, all the way to your apartment?"

"No, it got tangled up in some traffic and I lost it."

"Well, it was just a coincidence, just someone going in the same direction as you." I tried to sound light-hearted, but a nagging fear had hold of me.

Joan agreed. "I'm sure you're right; I shouldn't have even mentioned it. It's silly to think someone was following me."

"Even an ogre with green ears?"

Joan laughed. "I didn't see what he looked like. And I expect he didn't see what I looked like, either." After a few inconsequential remarks, we hung up. I was glad she was dismissing it from her mind, but I felt an unease, an anticipatory nervousness as if I was waiting for something to happen.

This disquiet continued to prick at me during the next few days. Joan did not go back to the studio, for which I was thankful. I began to convince myself we had both let our imaginations get the better of us. How easily one can delude himself, and ignore his own instincts. It was the newspaper account of yet another disappearance of a young woman that jolted me back into a restless tension. This one received much more prominence than the earlier one, and the writer hinted that there might be more than an accidental relationship between the two. This time, the woman in question had left her office at noon, and didn't return. Her car was later found in the parking lot where she had left it that morning. She disappeared in broad daylight. Where had she gone? What had happened to her? It was another mystery, and thinking about it galvanized me into telephoning Joan. I wanted to reassure myself that she was all right.

My fears were foolish; she was in good spirits, much better than mine. "I haven't gone back there," she reassured me, "and I haven't seen any suspicious vehicles."

"You sound like a police report,"

I chided, feeling more at ease every moment. My felicitous mood continued for another few days. Then, with all the force of an irresistible wave washing over me, a black depression seized me, when I was taking Joan home from a movie. I had noticed that she had been unusually quiet and introspective. But it wasn't till later that she explained.

"I think someone must be following me." The bald statement took my breath away.

"Was it the black car again?" I asked hoarsely. Despite the shock I felt, somehow, subconsciously, I had been expecting another grim reminder that something inimical was entering our lives.

Joan hesitated. "Oh, perhaps it's my imagination again, and I'm misinterpreting an innocuous situation. Last night I walked to the corner store and was returning when I saw someone across the street. He was standing near a doorway and it was getting to be dusk, so I wasn't able to distinguish him clearly. All I could tell was that he was tall and sort of hunched over. But I had the strangest feeling that he was watching me even though he seemed to be looking the other way. I hurried home and when I got there I looked back but there was no one in sight." She paused to clear her throat. "I don't know what to think. I'm getting kind of jumpy, for no reason, I guess."

I hadn't discussed the newspaper stories with Joan. Especially now, I wouldn't want to bring them up. But was there a connection? Was someone following Joan, ready to spirit her away? I couldn't come to any conclusion. I only knew that, in some way, an insidious threat seemed to hang over us—and even so, I had nothing to go on but a queasy hunch that might be only overwrought nerves. There was nothing to be gained by alarming her, so I reassured her that no one was after her, unless it was someone named Mark Crawford. We parted on this tentative presumption.

Despite what I said, though, the presentment lingered that danger awaited. Now I was sure she was being watched. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that this surveillance was connected with the disappearance of the two women. If someone indeed was shadowing Joan, then there could be no doubt that she faced an undisclosed peril that likely threatened her life. Once I had crystallized in my own mind the gravity of the situation, I decided that, somehow, I had to remain in close contact with Joan every minute. She needed my protection, whether she understood that or not. Who or what was after her remained a puzzle; but someone was. In a burst of impatience, I phoned her office. She wasn't in, and no one knew where she had gone. I was stunned. Had it happened to her, too? Had she been turned from a warm, living creature into a cold police statistic? I hung up and sat unmoving for several minutes. I couldn't think coherently. Through my mind ran the accounts of the two young women who had vanished so inexplicably. Joan should have been in her office and she wasn't. She had always left word before when she went somewhere; this time she hadn't. I got up and paced the floor. I wanted to rush down to her office even though it would do no good. And then the phone rang. It was Joan. She had just returned and heard that I had called her. I must have sounded like I had a speech impediment as I had trouble articulating for a moment. The pall of oppression lifted and I suddenly felt exuberant. I asked her where she had been. Now that she was safe after all, I would have to arrange to be with her or near her and prevent anything from happening to her. That shouldn't be difficult. Even when she told me she had visited the studio again, my light-hearted feeling didn't leave.

I would see to it she didn't go there any more. But I couldn't resist remonstrating with her on the subject.

"Oh, Mark, you're not starting that again, are you?" she snapped. "After all, the old man isn't a lecher, just a harmless painter. And besides, prominent people visit him. Or I should say, one prominent person. While I was there I was watching Victor Flamarian—that's his name, you know; it's in the lower corner of his front window—and he was doing another recreation. This must have been his third one. It was after Botticelli. I heard someone behind me and looked around. A distinguished-looking man had approached; he didn't enter through the outside door, I know; I would have heard him. He must have come from the rear. He looked familiar, and then I recognized him. He was Dr. Willston—you know, Freeman Willston, the internationally famous neurologist who is such a big art collector." I had heard of him. He attended all the shows and reputedly owned a fabulous collection of original works. An idea struck me.

"Say, could he by any chance be the patron of that old painter? Do you think he's buying those copies?"

"No," Joan demurred. "That wouldn't be logical. Dr. Willston only owns originals; he wouldn't touch anything that anyone else has. In fact, if he could buy the Mona Lisa, he would probably turn it down since there are so many copies around. He's a fanatical collector. So you see, I was in good company."

"Well, what did he want, then?"

"I don't know; he just stood there and didn't say anything and seemed to be watching Mr. Flamarian at work. But I had the feeling he was studying me; only, when I looked at him, his eyes were turned away. I guess it was just my imagination."

Something about her account troubled me. But I didn't feel worried. I felt that nothing could happen, as long as Joan and I were together, and I made a date to meet her when she was ready to leave work that evening. I had decided that there would be no time after that when she and I would be separated. When I saw her, I planned to insist that we go away for a short vacation. Certainly, that way, I could be at her side all the time.

The afternoon dragged. I found myself constantly looking at the clock. There was now no reason for anxiety, yet a couple of times I almost left early to meet Joan ahead of time. But I had a loan application to process that day, so I remained there working and finished just in time to reach Joan without her waiting for me.

But she wasn't in the lobby of her building, so I phoned her office. Sylvia, the receptionist, asked me twice who I was. Impatiently, I answered, "Mark Chapman. C-H-A-P-M-A-N! You know who I am!"

"Yes, Mr. Chapman," she replied tartly. "But you already phoned for Joan half an hour ago."

"What? What do you mean? I haven't phoned her."

"Well, the voice said it was you, and told me to tell Joan you—or he, or whoever it was—would be waiting in the drug store across the street. I gave Joan the message, and she left to meet you—or him. Wasn't it you, Mr. Chapman? Mr. Chapman?" Her voice barely penetrated as I left the phone dangling. Someone impersonating me! The thought gave me chills. What could it mean? I flung myself away and stormed to the front desk, where the guard on duty had his place. I must have sounded incoherent as I gabbled at him. He looked at me queerly and then nodded his head. Yes, Miss Westin had left a short while ago; he remembered seeing her on the way out. Yes, she was alone. Breathlessly, I rushed out to the street and looked about wildly. "Joan, Joan," I was mumbling uncon-

sciously to myself. I rushed across to the drug store and frantically questioned the druggist and the girl at the cash register; neither had seen anyone resembling Joan. Back on the street, I stood irresolutely. People were leaving work; several jostled past me. One young woman drew my attention. She was wearing a red coat that looked so much like Joan's that for a moment I almost imagined I was seeing my beloved. Another went by, her blond hair momentarily transfixing me. I turned away in chagrin. Then across the street, I spied a couple moving away from me. Something about the way the woman walked. Yes, she too was blond, but not with the brassy look of the other one. Joan! It was Joan! The man with her held her arm. He must be taking her somewhere. It had to be against her will, or she would have waited for me. I sprinted after them, pushing people aside heedlessly. "Joan, wait, Joan!" I yelled, hoping to distract them. The man looked around, then said something to his companion. She turned and I was gazing at a stranger.

The realization that I was beginning to imagine things sobered me. I certainly couldn't scour the city, peering at everyone to see if I could discover Joan. She had been taken somewhere, unwillingly, I was sure. I would find no clues to her whereabouts walking the streets. I went back to my car. She had visited that strange studio several times. There had to be a link between those visits and what had happened to her. I had been worried ever since I knew she had been going there. And the old man . . . a queer sort, with his hesitant comportment, somehow frightening. That tall, thin figure, slightly stooped. My God! The description fit the person who had been watching near Joan's apartment. He held the key to the mystery.

The studio was across town. I broke some traffic laws getting there. The street where it was located was a narrow one, and I was forced to park a block away, which seemed prudent in any case. But would there be anyone there at this time? I could only hope there would be, and that some plan of action would present itself. I approached the building as unobtrusively as possible. It was dark. I stole to the door and gently turned the knob. As I suspected, it was locked. I tried looking through the front window, but heavy draperies hid everything from view. I went back to the door and listened intently. Not a sound escaped. To all appearances, the room within was deserted. I retraced my steps for a short distance and stopped to wait alongside another building. There were no passers-by on the street. I watched the studio, undecided. This waiting was agony. I wanted to be doing something, but I was powerless to take the initiative. I could try forcing the door, but that could lead to problems with the police, and perhaps a fateful delay. Then I recalled Joan mentioning Dr. Willston. Yes, there was something odd there. He had entered the room from the rear. Had he been there all the time? If so, was he involved, too? He was another inexplicable element.

Two blocks away was a drug store. I ran the distance and almost ripped the telephone directory off its chain. There was no Freeman Willston listed, and he had a private number which the operator would not disclose. The more I thought about him, the more convinced I was that he played an important part in the mystery. But how to find him! Possibly the studio held some clue to his whereabouts or something that would give me an idea of what was going on. I ran back toward it, determined to force an entry after all. But as I started down the street, I saw a shadowy figure steal forth from the doorway. It was the old artist, Victor Mamarian, walking with a mechanical gait, and carrying an oblong package under his arm. So he had been there after all.

Luck was with me. He proceeded down the street slowly, in the opposite direction. I dashed back to my car and followed him. At last there was hope. He would lead me to Joan, I felt certain. The chain that had been wrapped so tightly about me, constricting my breathing, slackened a bit. The air coming through an open window felt refreshing, dissipating the miasmic fog that had been clouding my thoughts. I didn't have much to go on, but it was enough at the moment to put new life into me.

Very circumspectly I let the car drift behind the hunched figure ahead. He turned the corner. There was the black car Joan had seen! He was getting into it and in another moment he pulled away. Now it was just a matter of remaining unnoticed in the traffic, which shouldn't be difficult. He proceeded at a slow pace and several times I had to slip back of other cars to avoid being conspicuous. We finally hit a freeway, and Flamarian speeded up. After a few miles he turned off, onto a country road. We were now outside the city limits, heading north. I dropped farther back and once turned off at a crossroads, and then came back on the highway again, in order to allay suspicion. The car ahead was several blocks away, but I had no trouble keeping it identified, owing to a missing glass in one of the taillights which made a bright pinpoint in the night. The road was winding, and frequently the light ahead would disappear, only to become visible again as I made the turn. Swinging around a long curve, I saw ahead my quarry slowing. He turned off the road, onto what was nothing more than a dirt path, between a clump of bushes. I watched the light dwindle, before proceeding. After about a hundred yards, jouncing over the ruts as slowly as I could go, I spied the car lights through the low hanging trees ahead. It took a few moments to find a suitable spot to hide my car, off the lane under some foliage. Now I cursed myself for not having brought a weapon. I had at least two individuals to contend with, but it was too late to worry about that now. I crept forward, trying to be quiet. But when I snapped a small twig, it sounded like a shot in the stillness.

The other car had been parked with its headlights on, shining glaringly on a rambling stone house. As I drew nearer, the front door opened. Framed there in the light was the old painter, behind him an indistinguishable figure. Flamarian was leaving, minus his parcel. I ducked back out of sight and watched him back around and drive past me. Now all was dark; not a glimmer could be seen at the house. The brooding building loomed ghostlike, a monolithic monster waiting to pounce. Within was the answer to the puzzling questions that plagued me, I knew. Was Joan there? She had to be. This had to be the home of Freeman Willston, and Willston had to be behind the mystery. Who would know what went on at this secluded site? Somehow, I had to get in without being discovered. I skirted the front and made my way to the rear. A hedge at least ten feet high, bushy and shadowy in the dark, loomed ahead. I passed by an open gate. There on the right was a rear entry. Without much hope of finding it unlocked, I turned the knob anyway. To my surprise, the door gave readily. I entered a dark hallway that became obscure, as I gently pushed the door closed. Tentatively, I crept ahead, only able to navigate by sliding my hand along the wall. The stillness was so profound that the sound of my hand on the dry surface sounded rasping. Not even a breath of air stirred the deadly calm. Within a few feet, I encountered a closed door. Then I reached the wall again and continued on. The floor was carpeted, and my footsteps made no sound, for which I was thankful.

An almost imperceptible creak whispered behind me and as I started

to turn, a heavy blow struck me. My senses went reeling, although I didn't lose consciousness. I had the sensation of falling and the next awareness was of being dragged along the hall. I forced myself to concentrate on what was happening, trying to stave off the encroaching blackness. I was thrust into a room, and someone twisted my arms behind my back and lashed them with ropes. Then I was pulled up onto a chair. The pain in my head was like a hammer throb, and this helped me retain my senses. Finally, I was able to lift my head and peer about through half-closed eyes. An overhead light stabbed at me like a hot knife. Blinking, I began to focus again, and discerned a gray-haired man facing me.

"Ah, awake, Mr. Chapman; very good." The voice was suave, with a hint of derision in it.

"W-W-Willston . . . Freeman Willston . . ." I managed to croak.

"But of course, Mr. Chapman. At your service. Naturally, you didn't come just to see me; it was Miss Westin who drew you here." He smiled, his eyes glittering at me.

"Joan . . . Joan, what have you done with her? Where is she? If you've harmed her . . ."

"Now, now, don't strain yourself. I don't 'harm' women, as you seem to think. I just turn their talents to my use. But never fear, I certainly intend to satisfy your curiosity. I knew that sooner or later I would have to attend to you. Tonight merely precipitates matters. The idea came to me how I could enlist your services, so I'll simply be doing it sooner than expected. But I assure you, not before I fully explain my wonderful project to you." His laugh was ominous.

My head had been clearing rapidly, although a persistent pain remained. And I had gained control over my movements again. Trying to appear nonchalant, I glanced to where my captor was standing. He was about five feet from me, directly ahead. If I could rush him, even though my arms were tied, I might knock him over and put him out. As if divining my thoughts, Willston reached in his pocket and withdrew an automatic, which he waved negligently back and forth.

"You wouldn't want to do anything hasty," he admonished. "Curiosity killed the cat, Mr. Chapman, but in your case it won't kill you, just slow you down a bit." He gave a dry chuckle. "You'll appreciate my humor in a moment. You have a treat in store. It isn't everyone who can make the contribution to art Miss Westin—and you, also—have been offered. Naturally, you will accept. You want to be reunited with Miss Westin. Well, that desire certainly will be gratified. I believe in fulfilling my guests' wishes."

So far, he hadn't said much that made sense to me. But there was no denying the sinister import. For some crazy reason, I felt I had to delay as long as possible any action on his part, although at the moment there was nothing I could do to help myself. I could only hope that an opportunity would come. I tugged at my bonds experimentally; they were very tight. "I don't know what you're talking about," I gibed, "but it sounds crazy."

The remark angered him. He took a deep breath and in a somewhat hoarse voice retorted, "Young man, I care nothing for what you think. Your unenlightened attitude is typical of someone who can't conceive of wonders beyond his knowledge. You won't appreciate what I am doing, even though no one else has the knowledge or ability to duplicate my feat." His voice rose in excitement. "Do you know who I am? Do you have even an inkling of the acclaim I've won—both in the world of fine arts and medicine? My collection is priceless, the envy of every serious collector. Money has been no object, thanks to my success in the area of drugs and their uses. Why, I travel around the

world lecturing and serving as a consultant. I'm at the top of my profession; who is there above me? But even my peers don't know how far I've gone in my experiments. You're a fortunate man. You'll learn something they don't know." His voice had regained its normalcy.

"You've already seen one example of my genius: Victor Flamarian. Yes, slow, deliberate old Victor Flamarian. Did you think he was so stupid he didn't know you were following him? As soon as he told me, I knew I only had to wait a very short while, and you would walk in conveniently of your own free will—much easier than my usual method of welcoming visitors. Victor does my bidding, and very artistically, too, I might add. He really has no choice in the matter. You see, I discovered through my studies a very unusual drug combination. In a small dosage, it weakens the will and makes it subservient to mine. Victor is the perfect helper and he never asks questions. His movements are somewhat stultified, unfortunately, but his artistic abilities remain unimpaired. You're aware of that, I know. His efforts at copying the old masters are truly inspiring; I admit that even though I have no use for copies in my own collection. Since they are so faithful to the originals, I conceived of a way to utilize them as a guide to my own original creation, my life work, that I alone had the vision and knowledge to plan and execute. Even if you're not an art lover, Mr. Chapman, you will have to acknowledge the beauty of my conception. And you know, its beauty will never fade."

He paused to wet his lips. His hand still held the gun, hanging by his side. I speculated for an instant on the doctor's idiosyncrasies. He had an overweening ego, and considered himself witty. How I could take advantage of his foibles, I didn't know. He continued, "I mentioned the drug's effects in a small dosage; at greater strength, I found, it has a marvelous property. Taken in a prescribed amount, it slows down the bodily processes to the point where there is no perceptible pulse or heart beat. And yet the person is still alive. The body remains cool to the touch, but suffused with the faint glow of life. It is a condition of suspended animation. Indian fakirs and holy men, who can remain buried for months at a time and then return to full use of their faculties, perhaps come closest to what I have discovered. Only my injection produces a suspension that lasts for years, perhaps for centuries, with no deterioration of the bodily faculties." He laughed. "Of course I have an antidote, but what need is that?"

He brought the gun up. "But come, you must be impatient to see my private collection. We will go to it now."

I had trouble standing, but I felt better once on my feet. "What kind of wild madness is this." I gasped. "Whatever it is, you're a criminal. . . ."

"A genius!" he interrupted.

"A criminal," I continued inexorably. "A madman. You've abducted my fiancee; you're holding me at gunpoint. The police will investigate and find out that this Victor Flamarian comes here, and they'll trace us here. . . ."

"Bah!" he spat out the word. "They don't know what's going on. I pity their puny efforts. Victor will never talk. I have commanded him not to. He owes me everything. He was only too glad for my help in getting out of Belgrade to avoid persecution over his forgeries. He had this consuming obsession to recreate masterpieces, so I let him satisfy this urge and at the same time turn it to my own uses. Now go ahead of me. It's time for me to add a final design to my work." He prodded me ahead of him through an areaway, into a large room dimly lit. At the far end I saw a raised platform hidden by

a drapery arrangement. He motioned me to a hard-backed chair, withdrew a length of rope from a pocket, and before I could even collect my thoughts, flung it around my neck, fashioning a noose and tying it to one of the struts in back. In the next moment, he had also tied my legs to the chair.

"There, you may not be as comfortable," he smirked, "but it makes me more comfortable. Now, Mr. Chapman, it is time for the unveiling. This is something you will remember as long as you live—however long that will be." He strode to the wall and pressed a switch. Lights over the dais came on, flooding the area with their brightness. He went to the side of the draperies and pulled a cord that opened them. What incredible tableau was I seeing? The sight that met my astounded gaze made me cry out; futilely, I writhed on the chair. At first, I had trouble focusing on the figures now revealed. There must have been thirteen or fourteen in all, like actors in a play frozen in a static pose. All were young, beautiful women, some nude, some clothed in diaphanous gowns, reminiscent of Graeco-Roman days. Raggedly, I scanned the group; with a faint sigh of relief, I saw Joan wasn't there.

The doctor gestured with his hand, like an impresario drawing attention to the main attraction. "Do you understand this, Mr. Chapman?" he gloated. "These are not sculpted figures, but living, breathing creatures, sentient beings, existing now solely for my own appreciation. Can't you see the eternal beauty represented here, that I have captured at its most glorious, the bloom of seductive femininity that suffuses each delicate body?" He reached out and gently stroked the figure nearest him. "Goddesses all," he husked. "Juno, you know, the wife of Jupiter and queen of the gods. And indeed she is a queen." His fingers lingered over her full breasts and traveled down over her thighs. "And there, behind her, is the huntress, Diana. And over here, look, the Muses; aren't they lovely?" He pointed to the left, where a group of nine women were arranged in a dance circle. "After Mantegna, you know," he explained, and I understood he was referring to a painter I wasn't familiar with. "My goddesses have been very carefully selected, to conform as closely as possible to their artistic inspirations." He nodded his head toward the wall behind. There were several paintings hanging there, and I recognized the one I had seem Flamarian doing. Those must be all his copies. "As I said," he continued, "these copies mean nothing to me; but they serve admirably as artistic touchstones. I want my goddesses to reflect the original creativity of each artist." He gazed rapturously at the scene. "Here is combined the antiquity of a beautiful theme with the vitality of living sculpture," he exulted, "a delight to the eye and an aesthetic joy to the soul. Ah, but I almost forgot; I have my final figure in oils to hang, the one Victor just finished."

He swept past me and returned in a moment with a painting under his arm. This he hung alongside the others, then turned toward me. "You see, one of the most seductive of the goddesses, Botticelli's Venus. Note her demure pose, her hands just covering her breasts, her long golden hair cascading about her body. How fortunate to have found the living embodiment of Venus. Oh, your Miss Westin is indeed ideal."

At the mention of her name, I jerked back to a consciousness of my predicament. I had been listening to him, spellbound in dumb wonder. I hardly had been aware of anything else, but now I realized that while he had been talking, I must have been twisting and pulling on the rope that bound my arms. There was a

slight give to it, but only enough to allow me to move my hands slightly to the right or left behind my back. The rope around my neck, while impeding my movements, did allow considerable leeway side to side.

Dr. Willston came back past my chair. "She has been waiting patiently, and now it's time for her to take her place with the others." Frantically, I tried to turn my head, but could not see where he had gone. I pushed from the floor, and by dint of bumping about, was able to turn around enough to see him go to a hitherto unseen couch against the wall. Oh dear God! It was Joan! Joan, lying nude and passive, her golden hair pillowing her head, one arm hanging limply, her hand resting on the floor. The sight of her so near me, yet so far from my succor, jolted me so violently that I gagged as I strained against the rope around my throat.

Finally, I was able to gasp, "You devil, what have you done to her?"

"Now, Mr. Chapman, don't strain yourself." The voice was a travesty of solicitude. "Miss Westin is in the bloom of health. But of course, she is still under the effect of the drug I administered, waiting passively until I am ready for her."

"How—how did she get here?" I managed to exclaim. "If you've hurt her . . ." The emptiness of the threat made me stop; I could only gaze in agony at my beloved.

"Why, my young friend, don't you understand? It was so simple, just a prick and the right amount was injected before she knew what had happened. She came in answer to my phone call, thinking it was you. All I had to do was wait for her on the street. Before she even saw me, she had succumbed, and was ready to do my bidding. Isn't that right, my dear?" He looked at her a moment, then went

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to a nearby table, on which was a vial and syringe. "Now for the final injection," he said as he went back to Joan, the needle in his hand pointing unwaveringly at her.

"You fiend! You're loathsome!" I screamed imprecations at him, but he paid no attention. Calmly, he thrust in the needle, then set it down.

"Now Joan," he commanded. "Come with me." He grasped her arm and pulled her up. Obediently, she arose and allowed him to lead her toward the group at the other end of the room. I wanted to close my eyes in horror, as I saw her take one measured step after another, automaton-like, looking neither to right nor left, only staring straight ahead. And then . . . my stomach churned and my whole body shook, as she faltered, her movements slowing, until she stopped walking and stood poised, one foot still slightly raised above the floor, in an incompleted step.

The doctor held onto her arm, then swept her up in his arms and carried her the last few paces to the dais. He set her up on the stage, arranging her feet to support her. Her body moved at his direction, and then remained the way he placed it. "There, now, the final effects of the drug have taken place," he noted. "She is now one of my living statues, the fairest of all. And she shall have a foremost place, here, right in front of the others." He admired her. "When I saw you in Victor's studio, I knew he was right; you are, indeed, a Venus worthy of the greatest artist. How fortunate that he discovered you." He let her hair run through his fingers. "Not quite long enough, but we can add to it. But the color! Pure gold, just as Botticelli conceived it. Wonderful! Now, just the small detail of a shell for your dainty feet, and you will be a perfect recreation."

I groaned in sheer torment, as his hands desecrated her tender flesh. He fussed about her, arranging her pose. I shuddered at the sight, yet found myself watching almost in hypnotic fascination, as he carefully moved one limb, then another, each remaining whether he put it.

"It's been a long search," he went on, almost to himself. "I had trouble matching living subject to inanimate one. Victor helped me; but his greatest contribution was informing me of Miss Westin. She completes my work of art. Yes, the hardest part was finding the suitable representations; once they were located, and I knew where they lived and worked, and something about their habits, I only had to wait for a propitious moment to inoculate them. I took a chance with Miss Westin, but I was getting impatient. Well, no harm done; she's now safe and sound right here, where she will remain. And where you will remain, too, Mr. Chapman." As he talked, he continued to fuss with his figures, like a florist with a centerpiece.

With an effort, I jerked my attention from him as I felt a dull pain in my thigh. In twisting about, I had shifted my body on the hard seat enough to cause something in my pocket to work under me, and it was pressing against me. What was it . . .? Of course; it was my key ring. Wait! On it there was a small knife! My dwindling hopes flared up as I shifted about again, managing to free the metallic object. My arms were still tightly tied, but I found I could move them enough to reach my pocket with my fingers. I stopped watching the doctor at his abominable task, and concentrated all my attention on inching my hand into my pocket. I could only squeeze my thumb in, but it might be enough. I could touch the metal. Finally, I hooked the ring. At last! Slowly, I pulled it out. If I dropped it, my last chance would be gone. Once in my grasp, it wasn't hard to open the blade. But now came an excruciating session, as I sawed at the ropes. There was so little leeway in my

wrist movements that I didn't think I could exert enough pressure to sever the bonds. And as I squirmed about, the rope around my neck bit into the flesh. I wasn't sure if I was making headway or not.

Suddenly, I was conscious of the doctor starting back toward me. Instantly, I ceased moving. He went to the table and picked up the hypodermic and filled it. "And now, my dear Chapman," he purred, "since you so conveniently placed yourself at my disposal, I am going to avail myself of your services. Originally, I had only intended a goddess motif. But why shouldn't my goddesses have their gods near them? Yes, I have decided to expand my conception. And you will be the first in my newest mythological masterpiece. I haven't decided what part you will play, but I'm sure you will fit in suitably. I don't feel as particular in this case, I'm afraid, as with my young ladies. But never fear; you will be part of another magnificent design." I had cautiously been scraping the cord. If I could delay him, I might have a chance—a forlorn one, I was afraid.

If I could distract him, prick his vanity, anything to disturb him. As sarcastically as possible, I spat at him, "You're nothing but a self-deluded fool! You prattle about art and you don't know anything about it. This whole abysmal business is a mockery of all that's great and good in art." As I talked, I could see he was becoming angry. "Yes, just a travesty, just something to satisfy your own base desires." His breathing grew ragged and he had trouble keeping himself under control. I had moved about as I talked to him, which allowed me to attack my bonds with vigor. I felt the cord part. My hands were free!

Still unsuspecting, he strode back and forth nervously. "So you don't appreciate my efforts! You dare to criticize, you, with your plebeian attitudes and lack of imagination! Do you think I care what you like? My work is not for the rabble without the capacity to recognize its worth. I won't listen to anything more!" He started toward me. I reached up to cut the cord about my neck, but at my first movement, the doctor, with a shriek, flung himself on me. The force of his body knocked me sideways, and the rope tightened excruciatingly. Somehow, at the same time I was holding him off with one hand, I managed to sweep the blade against the tautened strands. They parted. I was free, except for my fettered legs, just as my enraged antagonist pummeled my head. In his fury, he was overanxious, and only grazed me. I couldn't rise to meet the onslaught. Instead, I grabbed him about the waist and yanked him even closer to me. At the same time, I reached behind his head and grasped his hair and then tugged. He tried to hit me again, but his awkward position robbed the flow of any force. Nor could I do much better, hampered as I was. I let loose for an instant, to fasten my hands on his throat. If I could choke him into insensibility, I could get free. But he jumped backward violently. The thought flitted through my mind that once clear of me, he could easily maneuver to reach me from a blind side, or even easier, just shoot me. With a desperate lunge, I clutched his legs. Together we went over, he on the floor, me on top of him, and the chair on top of me. He kicked a leg free and the point of his shoe crunched against my cheek. Dizzily, I held on, keeping a tight grip on one leg and fending off the other, while he writhed under me, his hand still holding the needle and waving it about ineffectually.

My head started to clear. I tried to drag him toward me; the chair impeded my efforts, and his thrashing about almost broke my grip. With a final lunge, I secured a hold on his arms, although his body was still squirming. I raised myself and jabbed with the edge of my hand against

his throat. There was a gurgling gasp and his body relaxed. Wearily, I pushed off him and freed my legs. I checked the recumbent body; it was breathing shallowly. On a table near the door was a telephone. I watched the doctor closely, as I went to it. I didn't realize it then, but I must have been hoping he would make some move, so I could punish him some more. But he remained unconscious. I phoned the police and then sat down to wait. My attention was divided between Willston and the figures he had desecrated. But the sight of Joan, so life-like yet frozen in an eternal pose, was so heart-rending that I couldn't bear to look any more. The doctor had said something about an antidote. Surely, it would be found when they searched the premises. But if not, as soon as the doctor recovered, he could be made to restore those pitiful creatures to full consciousness and vitality. That was the hope that sustained me, as I sat musing until the police arrived. I felt faint, after all I had gone through. I managed to explain a few things, but somewhat incoherently. They took the doctor to a patrol wagon. When I saw one of the officers look avidly at the posed figures, I wanted to fling something around Joan to hide her nakedness. But I didn't have the energy. I went back with two of the men; the third one was to remain on duty at the house until transportation was sent for the women.

Now I could only wait . . . wait for the doctor to recover . . . wait for him to be questioned . . . wait for some word on how he could bring back my loved one. . . .

In a specially equipped private ward of a hospital, fifteen women lie unmoving beneath white sheets, their bodies closely monitored with the latest in life-support devices. Sensors watch for any change; there is none. I don't go there anymore. I can't bear to see Joan's beautiful face, eyes closed as if in gentle sleep, only a faint flush to indicate life still exists. And somewhere, in a barred room in a security building, Dr. Freeman Willston lies unmoving on a bed, also under surveillance, a victim of his own hellish concoction. For during the fight, as he held the needle, the point pierced his own skin. Whether it was less than a full charge and will wear off, no one knows. Dr. Willston cannot privide the antidote. He left no notes, and medical experts found only an empty bottle.

The Hand of Every

by Carl Jacobi

The mud was ankle deep, and the monsoon rain was pounding down in sheets when the two-wheeled cart drew up before the house. Patterson stared over the backs of the steaming bullocks and scowled into the gloom.

"If you ask me," he said sarcastically to the Malagasy driver, "what this northwest coast needs is a new weather bureau. Have we arrived, old timer?"

The native nodded, reached behind him and seized a battered suitcase. Silently, with a powerful heave of his black arms, he flung the bag far across the roadway into a pool of water.

"Hey!"

A cry of indignation burst from Patterson as he leaped down from his high seat and groped forward to retrieve his property. That bag contained his only other suit, not to mention his last can of American tobacco. But before he could straighten up to voice his anger, the Malagasy, with a nervous glance over his shoulder, had swung the two bullocks and headed back down the muddy road.

"Nice," Patterson muttered. "Come and spend your vacation in Madagascar. Hospitality is our by-word. Oh yeah!"

He wiped the dirt from the suitcase with his handkerchief. Then he turned slowly and moved up the inclined path to the house.

It was more of a barn than a house, a two-story box-like structure, built in the severe fashion of French colonial planters, with walls of dirty clay and a roof of galvanized iron. Water dripped mournfully from the

troughless eaves. A shuttered window showed a faint gleam of light like a drooling eye in the darkness.

Patterson knocked sharply.

The door opened, and a tall, rangy man stood silhouetted in the glare of a gasoline lamp.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm looking for Professor Craig Travers. My name's Patterson . . . of the *Consolidated Press.*"

It sounded incongruous, that introduction way out here, miles from civilization. But the man on the threshold only nodded.

"I'm Travers. Come in, please."

There were four other occupants of the room, Patterson saw as he entered, his eyes quickly accustoming themselves to the light. One, a girl in her late twenties, with striking black hair and hazel eyes, would be Travers' daughter, Christine. She was even prettier than her newspaper pictures. In a corner stood a stalwart Hova native, garbed in only a loincloth. The two white men who sat across a table playing cards were unknown to him.

"You're a newspaper man, eh?" Travers said. "Well, there's a partner-in-trade here ahead of you. But don't worry, you're not too late. We only arrived here yesterday ourselves and have made no effort yet to locate the treasure."

Patterson nodded. What with delayed steamer schedules and passport troubles, this was the one bit of good news he had had since leaving Port Said.

Three weeks ago, as CP's ace foreign correspondent, he had been covering the latest arrival of Australian troops in the Near East. But even the movements of incoming colonials had lost their importance in that zone after a time. Patterson's copy had dwindled. Then the New York office had reassigned him to the Travers story.

Excepting the war, Professor Craig Travers was undoubtedly the best "feature copy" of the day. It was he who had gone into Cambodia in '36 and discovered a Khmer temple, older and richer than the famed Angkor-Wat. Now . . .

Now he was after bigger game. Travers claimed to have authentic information as to the whereabouts of the lost treasure of Henry Every, the once-famous buccaneer of the Indian Ocean. That treasure was somewhere in northwest Madagascar, incountry from Majunga. Its value was said to exceed the wildest estimates.

But the news interest came from a different angle. According to history, Henry Every, after looting and pillaging ships and making himself almost a legendary figure, had disappeared. By one account he had gone back to Madagascar to reclaim the treasure he had hidden. There he had been captured by a wild tribe of Malagasies.

The rest wasn't pleasant. The natives had inflicted every conceivable kind of hideous torture on the pirate in an effort to make him reveal the location of his hiding place. His ears and eyelids had been pierced with hot bamboo, his lips cut and filled with salt; and finally the limbs of his body had been cut off, one by one.

Today a host of conflicting legends still lingered in and about Majunga. Henry Every was alive, Portuguese traders said. Part of his dismembered body had been found perfectly preserved in a *klubi* swamp and had been resurrected by a Malagasy witchdoctor. That segmented body now haunted the interior trails, a ghastly, horrible thing, searching for its long-lost treasure.

Patterson remembered the Dutch explorer who had gone into Madagascar a year ago on a similar treasure-seeking mission. He had come back to the coast all right, but he had died there, hopelessly insane.

Professor Travers turned now and made the necessary introductions.

The dark, bushy-haired man with the pongee suit and the black stringed

tie was Raoul Boreau of the *Compagnie d' Madagascar*. Heading into the interior to look over new timber preserves, he was laying over in this deserted planter's house, which the professor had arranged for himself and his daughter.

Marc Bridgman, the other white man, tall and hawkfaced, was reporter for the *London Sentinel*. Bridgman came forward, extending his hand.

"Crazy lot, these editors of ours," he said. "They'll send a man to the jumping-off spot just for a story, eh?"

After that Patterson leaned back in his chair, lit a cigar and surveyed his surroundings. The house was anything but a cheerful one. The few scraps of furniture and the dust-heavy cobwebs that hung from the ceiling showed that it had been hastily prepared for occupancy. Outside the storm seemed to be dying off, but the rain still drummed the iron roof.

"How much would you say this treasure's worth?" Patterson began abruptly, accepting a cup of tea from the Hova servant. "Assuming, that is, that it really exists?"

Travers fingered the heavy fob of his watch and shrugged. "According to my record, Henry Every's booty at one time amounted to 200,000 gold sequins and 500,000 pieces of eight. That, however, is a conservative estimate. Boreau here has a government monograph with the official data and figures. If he doesn't mind, I'd like to show it to you."

The Frenchman nodded, rose and left the room. He was gone ten minutes. Then it abruptly happened! From outside, from the grounds beyond the house a sudden scream blasted into the silence of the room. It came again, to be cut off in a liquid gurgle.

Rigid an instant, Patterson was across to the door, even as Bridgman and Travers leaped from their chairs. A half light from a ghost of a moon, partially concealed in the eastern sky, was spread across the grounds now. But in either direction all he could see was the long unkempt weeds and the jungle that towered just beyond.

Patterson paced twenty yards hesitatingly into the drizzle. Then off to his left a faint moan sounded. He ran quickly down a short rise, slogged over marshy soil and drew up in a tangle of dense undergrowth.

A moment later the three of them were staring down at the motionless body. Arms spread wide, the figure of a man lay there, one leg doubled curiously beneath him. It was a man of about fifty odd, with iron gray hair, a suit of khaki drill and a well-worn campaign hat.

His head was thrown back, and there were deep finger indentations on his throat, as if he had been strangled.

"He's dead!" Travers choked. "By the living . . ."

Patterson's eyes twisted to a clump of wild bougainvillea a yard away, and a chill of horror swept over him. For a moment he thought he saw a long sinuous something there, a dark snake-like body, terminating in a white flat surface with five protuberances. Fists clenched, he knelt and placed his ear to the man's heart.

"Not dead," he said. "Grab his feet, and we'll carry him in."

But before they could act, the man opened his eyes and fought to a sitting position. He threw an arm before his face as if to hide something from his sight.

"The hand . . .!" he whispered hoarsely. "Take it away! . . . Oh, God!"

Bridgman pulled a flask from his pocket and poured a quantity of liquor down the man's throat. The stranger coughed and gasped. With one supporting arm about his waist, Patterson lifted him to his feet and guided him slowly to the house. Inside, the man slumped into a chair and stared across the room vacantly.

"I'm . . . I'm Frank Kramer," he

began haltingly. "Live on the other side of the swamp. I heard someone had taken over this place, and I came to pay a call. Shouldn't have come alone at night, I know, but we haven't had any trouble from the hand here for almost a year now."

Boreau, the French *Company* man, had re-entered the room during the words and stood staring.

"Hand . . .? Trouble?" Travers repeated slowly. "What do you mean?"

It seemed the whites of Kramer's eyes slowly clouded as he twisted uneasily in his chair.

"I don't see how you could have passed through the native villages between here and Majunga without hearing about it," he said. "I mean the hand of Every. Every native Malagasy will tell you that a severed hand and arm exists as a separate entity—alive, somewhere in this Betsileo area. And every planter in the district believes it to be the hand of the buccaneer."

Silence gripped the room for a moment. Then Christine Travers forced a nervous laugh. "Really, Mr. Kramer," she said, "that doesn't make sense."

"I know it sounds mad, wild," Kramer agreed. "But take a look at my throat. What do you suppose caused those marks? Call me a fool, if you will, but the thing attacked me as I entered your grounds. It was a hand, I tell you, a hand with the arm ending at the elbow, partially covered with a sleeve of blue velvet. I had a clear view of the thing before it leaped at me like a striking cobra. It was . . . horrible!"

Boreau lit a cigarette and blew a shaft of smoke ceilingward.

"I think, M'sieu, what you need is a night's sleep," he said. "I suggest you stay here tonight. In the morning you will forget all about these—visions."

Patterson had never been troubled with insomnia, and tonight he fell into a dreamless slumber the moment his head struck the pillow. Hours later, however, as he lay on the huge four-poster, he became aware that for some time he had been awake, listening. The house was steeped in silence. There was only the scratching of a tree branch against the window as it moved back and forth in the night wind.

Patterson gnawed his lip. Was it imagination, or had he heard someone . . . something stealthily opening the door, moving across the intervening space toward the bed?

He got up, lit the lamp. The room was empty. Chair, table, suitcase . . . all were in their places as he had left them. But as he was about to blow out the flame again, his eyes turned toward the door, and his scalp rose in terror.

Of its own accord, that door was swinging slowly shut. It was as if an invisible person had left the room, moving into the outer corridor.

Patterson leaped forward, ran out into the hallway and followed that hallway to the stairs. He leaned there a moment against the old cape-lilac-wood bannister, staring down into a well of darkness. And then gradually that horror he had experienced in his room returned in a soul-consuming wave.

Starlight filtered through a narrow window high on the wall. By its faint gleam he saw . . . Good God!

Wriggling down the carpeted stairs, a step at a time, was . . . a man's hand and arm! Severed at the elbow, clothed in a sleeve of some dark material, it moved crabwise, the five fingers carrying it uncertainly forward.

For twenty seconds Patterson stood there, powerless to move, heart pounding wildly. Then he lunged across to the far wall, seized a hooked *sakalava* knife which he remembered hung there. He took quick aim and threw the knife with all his strength.

The result was cataclysmic. Even as the knife struck with a clang, ricocheted and went bounding down in-

to the blackness, the hand gave a violent leap forward. It hurtled down the stairs like a frightened serpent.

Suppressing his horror, Patterson followed in quick pursuit. On the lower floor he blundered into a chair and sprawled headlong across it. Simultaneously the door leading to the main room of the house banged open, and a shaft of light from within blinded him momentarily.

Raoul Boreau stood there on the threshold, fully dressed.

"In heaven's name, M'sieu," he cried, "what is wrong?"

Patterson got painfully to his feet, pushed past him and continued down the hallway to the far end. There was a window there, the bamboo shutter still moving gently as if some object had brushed against it. The American thrust his head out, peered long and intently into the wet grounds.

Nothing! He returned to the Frenchman and surveyed him with narrowed eyes.

"What are you doing about at this hour?" he demanded. "Did you see anything?"

"See anything? No, M'sieu. I sleep but little, and I have not yet gone to bed. What . . . what is wrong?"

If the man were lying, he was a good actor. His eyes were opened wide, and as he stood there, leaning against the door frame, his fingers trembled perceptibly.

Voices sounded on the floor above. A moment later Professor Travers and the Hova servant appeared on the stairs, each carrying a lit candle. Trailing them were Marc Bridgman, Frank Kramer, and the girl, Christine. Travers' daughter had a blue negligee wrapped loosely about her.

But even after he had told his story, Patterson was aware that only Kramer believed him. Bridgman laughed dryly and said something about newspapermen being the same the world over. Travers and his daughter exchanged puzzled glances, and Kramer remained silent. But the lips of the man who lived on the other side of the swamp were pressed together tight, and his face was contorted with fear.

With the aid of a lantern Patterson and the professor searched the house. They went out into the dripping grounds and examined the stable in the rear where were kept the two horses and buckboard that had brought Travers and his daughter, and the little saddle horse Raoul Boreau had ridden to the house. They inspected the brush-grown flower bed beneath the hall window. But their search was fruitless.

Back in his room half an hour later, the American sat on the edge of his bed and rubbed his jaw slowly.

"A severed hand," he said to himself. "A hand that's alive. Good lord, it can't be . . ."

Morning, and after a breakfast served by the Hova, Professor Travers pushed aside his dishes and spread a yellowed paper on the table before him.

"This is the map upon which I'm basing all my hopes and plans," he said. "It is in no sense complete, but I have reason to believe it is authentic. According to my calculations, the treasure is located somewhere near this house. Mr. Kramer, do you know of a large baobab tree in the vicinity, flanked on either side by two rectangularly shaped rocks?"

Kramer thought a moment, then nodded. "There's a tree of that description on the other side of the swamp."

"And is there a small creek passing, say within fifty yards of that tree?"

Again Kramer considered. "Yes, I think there is."

The statement drew an exclamation of satisfaction from Travers. He left the room to reappear a moment later with three large-sized spades. He handed one each to Bridgman and

Patterson, gave the other to the Hova servant.

"You two newspapermen might as well help," he said dryly.

The swamp was far worse than Patterson had expected it could possibly be. A low marshy lake in reality, it was densely overgrown with man-high rip grass and reeds. Only Kramer knew the trail, and he led the way cautiously over rotting logs and around treacherous patches of quicksand.

But aside from the difficulty of access, there was something about this wild wasteland that affected Patterson strangely. An unseen presence seemed to be lurking just beyond their vision range, watching them as they passed.

Christine Travers fell in step with him.

"I . . . I don't like it here," she said. "Have you noticed how quiet it is? As if . . . as if we were in the land of the dead."

It was quiet, and when a half hour later they reached high ground and finally emerged from the marsh, the silence seemed to press down upon them like a material pall. Frank Kramer mounted a short rise and pointed.

"There's the tree," he said.

At first glance Patterson saw only a small glade, walled in on three sides by the jungle. The baobab tree rose up at the far end.

Then he looked again, and his heart skipped a beat. The tree was dead! More than that, it was curiously shaped, possessing four bare branches growing out of a thick center trunk, pointing stiffly to the leaden sky. The other branch was short and broad, not unlike . . . a human thumb.

It was Christine Travers who put it into words. "Why . . . it looks like a man's hand," she said.

The Hova servant rolled a raw tobacco cigarette, lit it quietly. Travers took out his map, glanced at it, and pointed toward the wall of trees.

"I suggest we spread out and cover the ground in a complete circle, using the tree as an axis," he said. "Look for a partially buried rock, with the letter 'E' chipped upon it."

Bridgman shouldered his spade and moved out across the glade. Kramer hesitated.

"This is the district where it's supposed to be," he muttered. "The Malagasies say the hand will attack anyone who comes near it."

A jeering laugh broke from Boreau. But Patterson, accompanied by Christine, struck out rapidly and plunged into the jungle. A swarm of insects rose up around them. As if they had suddenly opened the door of some huge mushroom cellar, the air became moist and heavy.

For a quarter of an hour the American and the girl searched without result. The jungle floor was thick with rotted vegetation, and only occasionally did they see a rock or piece of shale projecting through it. None showed any signs of carving.

Abruptly Patterson went taut. Echoing through the heavy air came the brittle sound of a pistol shot.

He turned, seized the girl and led the way back at a stumbling run. Vines and branches lashed their faces as they raced through the underbrush.

Reaching the clearing, they found it deserted. There was no sign of the other members of the party. Face white, Christine stared before her, uttered a short cry.

"Look!"

Blood congealed in Patterson's veins as his eyes followed her gaze. Directly before the dead tree lay the body of the Hova servant. His eyes were bulging from a face already turned a purplish black; his head was tilted back, revealing deep marks of strangulation on his throat.

The native had died horribly, but not without a struggle. Still clenched in his right fist was the old Spanish pistol Travers had given him. The ground for several yards around was gouged and trampled, as if a fearful struggle had taken place.

And there was something else . . . something that drew the breath slowly through Patterson's clenched teeth and rooted him to the spot. Half concealed in the long weeds, twenty feet away lay an object that defied all laws of reality.

It was the hand he had seen the night before, the severed arm and hand in the sleeve of blue velvet. The long tapering fingers were crouched low, as if waiting to spring. In the grey light the fingernails gleamed dully like five eyes watching him.

Patterson felt the girl grip his coat convulsively. Then, steeling his nerves, he bent down slowly and reached for the native's revolver.

But with apparently evil insight, the hand suddenly leaped into action. It turned and scuttled away through the long grass, the fingers moving in and out like tiny deformed legs.

Patterson had the gun then, and he yanked the trigger twice in quick succession. The reports blasted into the dead air, followed by Christine's jangling scream.

One of the slugs hit! Patterson saw the hand recoil and jerk sideways. Then with renewed speed it cut into a clump of heavier underbrush and disappeared into the jungle.

Crashing footsteps sounded then, and Professor Travers rushed into the glade. He gave a gasp of relief as he saw his daughter unharmed. But when he looked upon the dead body of the Hova, his jaw sagged, and the words he was about to speak died in an unintelligible whisper.

A moment later Frank Kramer hurried out of the jungle. He backed away from the corpse slowly, moving to Patterson's side as if for protection.

"I told you it was alive . . . real," he whispered. "We . . . we've got to get out."

Bridgman, who entered the glade from the opposite side, uttered a short exclamation, then stood staring in heavy silence. But Raoul Boreau exhibited better nerve control. Only for a moment did his face mirror the horror he saw. Then he knelt and examined the marks on the Hova's throat.

"Strangled," he said dully. "Whoever . . . whatever did it, had power in its fingers."

There was little that could be done. While Professor Travers and Boreau remained with Christine, the two newspapermen made a futile search of the surrounding jungle. Back in the glade, the professor addressed them collectively.

"The authorities in Majunga will have to be informed," he said. "Fortunately the house is equipped with a telephone. But I'm going to suggest postponing a report for a day or so. You two men have a story, but a few hours one way or another can make little difference."

The Hova's body was carried back to the house, placed in a summer kitchen that opened off the rear. Christine Travers retired to her room, and Frank Kramer asked permission to stay.

"I don't want to cross that swamp again alone," he said. "Not now at any rate. I'm getting out of this blasted island in a week or so anyway. Got a brother running a puppet show in the States, and I've got a chance to go with him on the same theatrical circuit."

Boreau sneered openly at the man's palpable fright, lit a cigarette and strolled from the room. Alone with the professor a moment later, Patterson voiced the thought that was uppermost in his mind.

"It strikes me," he said, "that an ordinary stone with an initial chipped on it is a pretty simple landmark for a treasure that's been lost as long as this."

Travers frowned, then nodded shortly. "You're a clever man, Mr. Patterson. Well, I don't mind telling you that clue was a false one. There is no such landmark."

"But . . . but I don't understand."

For an instant Travers sat in silence. Then he leaned forward, eyes

closing to crescents.

"I have never believed in the supernatural," he said. "But you know as well as I that there are forces acting against us which we are unable to understand. For the present at least I prefer to keep all information to myself. . . . Now, tell me, what do you know about this man, Bridgman?"

Patterson started. "Nothing more than he's told us. Why?"

The professor shrugged. "Henry Every was not the real name of the pirate whose treasure we're trying to find," he said. "Long before he became a buccaneer, he was known in London by the name of . . . Bridgman!"

After that Patterson made a second tour of the house and grounds. Inside he found nothing but shadows and gloom, but outside, near the flower bed where they had looked the night before, his eyes sighted something partially buried in the moist earth.

It was a small shred of blue velvet cloth. Patterson thrust it into his pocket, but made no mention of his discovery.

Dinner that night was a strained affair. Christine Travers sat stiffly beside her father, eating little. Frank Kramer drank cup after cup of strong black coffee. The professor made meaningless drawings on the table cloth.

Only Boreau appeared at ease. The French *Company* man talked incessantly and was almost jovial.

But over the room a blanket of gloom lay heavily, which neither repartee nor the glaring light of the gasoline lamp could dispel. The cloying smell of hibiscus stole through the open window like the smell of the open grave.

For hours after he had gone to bed, Patterson lay awake, brain reviewing the horror, detail for detail. What was the severed hand? Could the witchdoctor-resurrection-story be believed in this day of twentieth-century science? Why had the Hova been singled out for the thing's attack?

Patterson knew something of the obeah beliefs of the African coast and the life-after-death superstitions of the South Sea Melanesians. The Malagasies were a strange mixture of both native cultures.

He slept finally, to awake with a start. Save for the ticking of the clock the house was still.

Or was it? He strained his ears for a repetition of the sound instinct told him had come from below. And then a piece of ice slid up his spine. Faintly through the still air came the heavy creaking of an outer door.

Patterson slid out of bed, took up his revolver and crossed to the open window.

The sounds became an actuality then. Peering out, he recoiled as a wave of horror billowed over him.

The grounds below were swathed in blackness. But moving from the summer kitchen door . . . was the hand! It was a thing of radiating hellfire now! A greenish effulgence encircled it. In the lurid glow the reporter could see it clearly.

But there was more! The fingers of the flaming hand gripped the corpse of the Hova servant. It was dragging the body of the native by the hair across the wet grounds.

To a point twenty yards from the house the ghastly aura-lit thing moved. Then abruptly the light disappeared.

Patterson gripped the window sill convulsively. An instant later the light and the hand re-entered his vision, and a scream rose unsounded to his lips.

The thing had another victim this time. The hand was gripped tightly about the throat of the girl, Christine. The ghost light played fully on her frozen features, white with terror. Fighting each step, she was drawn forward relentlessly, her bare arms trying futilely to free herself from the strangling grip.

Then and not until then did Patterson come to life. Wheeling, he lunged from the room, took the steps three at a time to the main floor. He lunged into the summer kitchen, ripped open the side door and slowed to a halt a yard past the threshold.

Flare lightning momentarily illumined the heavens. Outlined in the uncertain flash a nightmare scene burned its way into his eyes.

Racing across the grounds toward him at a full gallop came the two white horses from the stable. They pulled the madly careening buckboard, and on the driver's seat but a single figure was visible. Christine Travers clung there, wild-eyed, undone hair streaming out behind. Gripping the reins was the severed hand!

Patterson had but an instant to make his decision. He braced and leaped even as the buckboard hurtled abreast of him. A bone-jarring blow crashed into his jaw, catapulting him backwards. Then he was down, the grinding wheels missing him by inches. The buckboard sped on toward the main road.

But that blow served a double purpose. It jarred Patterson's brain into machine-gun action, and it told him the thing driving the buckboard was . . . must be . . . human!

Staggering to his feet, he ran for the stable. Boreau's saddle horse was there, pawing nervously. Patterson untethered it, wheeled the animal out the door and kneed it to a gallop.

It was a race then, a mad, incredible race which he was to remember to his dying day. The rutted road wound in and out through the Madagascar wilds, through open bog land, through heavy jungle where giant trees towered on either side like an audience of ghouls. Ahead the fleeing buckboard was lost in the blackness. There were only the echoing screams of the girl, Christine, to urge him on.

Patterson rode as he had never ridden before. On pounded the saddle horse, head down, mane flying. But in that flash of seconds it seemed to the American he was on a treadmill with endless backdrops of painted scenery rushing by him. Every yard, every passing moment was an eternity.

And then he mounted a last hillock and looked down on an open plain, a level of lighter shadow in the gloom. The buckboard was almost within reach.

He plummeted down the slope, thundered abreast of it. Timing his movement, he vaulted from the horse, leaped across three feet of rushing open space to the buckboard's seat.

Savage blows ground into his face as his hands lashed out, reaching for the thing's throat. They found it and exerted pressure. They held there with every ounce of strength in Patterson's arms, while the buckboard caromed down the night road like a crazy juggernaut.

And then abruptly the thing in his hands uttered a moan of defeat. It sagged, stopped its blows and fell back limp. Patterson released it and pulled the horses to a halt.

"All right, Miss Travers," he panted. "We can go back now. I think this solves the mystery of the severed hand."

It was the next day, and under a bright sun Professor Travers stood beside the dead baobab tree in the open glade on the far side of the swamp. Facing east, he paced off thirty paces, then halted and struck a length of bamboo in the ground. Watch in hand, he waited until the hands pointed to an hour past noon.

He then stretched a cord on a line with the shadow of the bamboo toward the geometric center of the glade. Presently he had finished his calculations.

"This is the spot," he said. "Dig."

Patterson and Bridgman took turns alternately. In twenty minutes their spades struck something that gave off a metallic clang. And a moment later the heavy, iron chest was raised to the surface and opened.

Piles of tarnished gold coins gleamed dully in the sunlight. On one side was a separate compartment, and there, piled in a heaping mass, were jewels of every description. Stenciled on the inside of the cover was the name: EVERY. Travers' voice was trembling with emotion as he spoke:

"It's all here," he said, "much more than I had anticipated. Gentlemen, if you'll help me lift the chest onto that barrow, we can return to the house."

The passage back was made in silence. Not until they had entered the main room and carried the chest to the center table did Christine break into their thoughts. She turned then, said,

"Mr. Patterson, I know the mystery is ended. But there are a few details I still don't understand. Will you tell us how . . .?"

"How I knew the severed hand was a mundane thing of the world? Well, I didn't at first until I began to reason things out. I was fooled, of course, because there were two hands: one which I saw on the staircase last night and again in the weeds by the Hova's body—and the other which apparently drove the buckboard.

"The hand that appeared on the stairs was an amazingly life-like thing, fashioned from the flexible skin-like bark of the *baracava* tree, weighted with clay, and cunningly tinted with the juice of the *dhapakol*-bush berry. No other materials could have given the same effect."

Patterson crossed the room to a cupboard and returned to place the false hand on the table where they all could see. Even at close range, it was a thing of horror, perfect as to shape and detail. The fingernails, carefully made of paraffin, gleamed dully. The *baracava* bark had every semblance of human skin.

"Invisible wires were fastened to that hand," Patterson said. "They trailed down the staircase to the lower floor corridor, and they permitted the operator to control the fingers as well as the forward movement.

"In a similar manner it was drawn through the weeds in the glade from a nearby point in the jungle. Both times, you will remember, the visibility was poor. We saw the hand as a supernatural object because we had been previously prepared by a slow and insidious undermining of our logic and reasoning.

"The hand that dragged the body of the Hova across the grounds and later drove the buckboard needs a separate explanation. The operator wore a black cloth, shielding his entire body, save his right arm. That arm was thickly covered, first with a protecting oil, then with calcium sulphide to give off a luminous glow in the dark."

"But the Hova . . ." interrupted Christine, puzzled.

Patterson smiled and took out a cigar. "The Hova was strangled to death after a furious fight with the hand-manipulator. He was killed, of course, to frighten Travers . . . all of us . . . away from this district. His body was taken from the summer kitchen in a last attempt to destroy all incriminating evidence. Christine was kidnapped in the hope that she could be forced to reveal the information contained in Travers' map. For it was the treasure, the desire to locate Every's lost fortune, that was the motive behind it all.

"The guilty person had heard of Travers' proposed activities here and hoped to head him off. He had plenty of time, and he laid his plans carefully. But he made one slip.

"Although he had previously arranged a false attack on himself, he happened to mention inadvertently that he was familiar with a puppet show. No one but an experienced puppet-operator could have maneuvered that false hand in such a life-like manner."

Patterson paused and lit his cigar.

"That, gentlemen, is how I knew the criminal was Frank Kramer."

Damsels for the Damned

by Hugh B. Cave

This began one Friday morning when I arrived early at the high school. I often got there early, liking to walk through the empty halls with only the sound of my footsteps for company.

When alone in the school, I found I had time to look leisurely at the amazing array of notices and posters on the various bulletin boards. I had time to think quietly about the responsibilities of being a high-school principal in a growing town full of bright young people.

This morning, passing Room 12, I saw a sheet of paper on the corridor floor and picked it up, thinking it was just a bit of waste paper that should not have been dropped there. Only when I glanced at the lines of writing was I aware that it was a letter, or part of one.

The letter puzzled and disturbed me.

> and of course you know what that can mean in this town. I am sure to be talked about from one end of town to the other, and I just haven't the courage to face it. So even if I am not actually told to leave school, I will have to go away. I pray that you and Daddy will understand.

I read it again, frowning over it and wondering who might have dropped it. A girl, I guessed. Not too many high school boys called their fathers "Daddy," though some did. Once more

I studied the words. Yes, it was almost certainly a girl. Some girl in serious trouble. Pregnant, perhaps.

Stuffing the letter-fragment into a pocket, I went on down the hall to my office where, seated at my desk, I tried to work on a talk I'd be giving to a Parent-Teacher group that evening. But the letter kept intruding.

Some girl in trouble. Some girl in my school, in need of help. But there were 374 girls at Willow Hill High. I decided to wait until third period when Sarah Thurston would be free, and have a talk with her. Room 12, in front of which I'd found the letter, was her home room.

Sarah was alone when I walked in. She was at her desk, writing. With a questioning look at me she stood up, and I was impressed as always with the quality of her beauty. She had such a lovely, gentle face that it seemed almost unfair for her to have a stunning figure as well.

It was strange about this young woman. I seldom thought of other teachers at the school as being male or female. They were simply people I worked with. But at sight of Sarah some slumbering thing inside me always struggled to awaken.

She was unaware of this, of course. Indeed, she was aloof, apparently shy, and seldom even spoke unless spoken to. Nevertheless, things happened to me—or wanted to happen—when I was in her presence.

She was new to the school; that might explain it. She had begun teaching only two months ago, in September, coming here from her home town of Ellison, some ninety miles away. But other teachers at Willow Hill were new, too, and I had not reacted to any of those in the same disturbing way.

"Are you busy, Miss Thurston?"

She shook her head. "Not really, Mr. Woodring."

"I found this in front of your door this morning." I handed her the scrap of paper. "Someone seems to be in trouble. Perhaps you know the handwriting."

I was gazing at her rather intently when she glanced at the fragment of letter, and her reaction puzzled me. She took in a sharp, quick breath, then caught her lower lip between her teeth as though to suppress an exclamation. She *did* know the writing, I thought. Good.

But, frowning, she shook her head. "No-o-o," she said. "I don't think this was written by anyone in my home room, Mr. Woodring. Of course, I can't say for sure. I don't know my students that well yet. But I really don't think . . ."

She stopped talking, and I said guardedly, "It was written by a girl, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, yes. Probably."

"Some girl who has got herself pregnant, perhaps?"

"I suppose it could be that."

"I don't like the line about having to go away. Go where? Our girls aren't the sort who can just leave home and expect to cope on their own, Miss Thurston."

"No, they're not," she said. "Not most of them, at any rate."

"See what you can find out, will you?"

She nodded, not looking at me but frowning at the paper again. When I paused at the door on my way out, she was back at her desk and did not seem to notice my gesture of farewell.

She was upset, I thought. *Had* she recognized the writing in the letter? Was she trying to protect someone?

If so, she undoubtedly had some excellent reason for doing so, I told myself defiantly.

At the end of the school day I went to Room 12 again, to ask Sarah Thurston if she had discovered anything. I found her just getting ready to leave, and helped her on with her coat.

It was an inexpensive gray cloth coat, not exactly new. I hoped she wouldn't be wearing anything quite so thin when our New England weather

turned really cold.

In response to my question she said, "No, I haven't learned anything yet. But I'm working on it."

"I've an idea or two," I said. "Let me drive you home and tell you."

She seemed to hesitate, though it was not out of my way to give her a lift and I had done so before. On those occasions there had been others in the car, however, and my invitation to her had been more casual.

She finally nodded, though, and I walked her to the school parking lot.

"You say you have some ideas?" she asked, getting into my car.

"Yes." The letter really disturbed me, I told her. I didn't like to think some girl was so desperate that she might actually run away from home. "Chances are, if she does run, she'll get into worse trouble than she is now."

Sarah nodded but said nothing.

"Can't you have all the kids in your room write something?"

She shook her head. "They've already filled out forms of one kind or another. None of my home-room students wrote that letter, Mr. Woodring."

"You're sure?"

"Your finding it outside my door doesn't have to mean one of my students dropped it there, you know. The whole school uses the hall."

"Yes, of course. But isn't it logical to think—"

"I don't see why, really."

She was being difficult, I decided. Even hostile. Glancing at her, I saw in her usually gentle face a firmness, almost a hardness, I had never noticed before. It was as though she had decided I was an adversary in this matter of the letter.

Again I had a feeling she knew more about the letter than she was admitting.

Why was she trying to protect the girl? I thought I knew that, too. Willow Hill High's assistant principal, 60-year-old Mrs. Kershaw, was notoriously rigid on morals and a stickler for discipline.

But hiding truths from Mrs. Kershaw could be a dangerous game. She knew everything that happened or was likely to happen, and looked with suspicion on all new teachers anyway.

"Miss Thurston," I said.

Defensively she glanced at me. "Yes, Mr. Woodring?"

"I want to talk to you. Not here, not now, but leisurely and at length. Will you have dinner with me this evening?"

She actually looked frightened. "Oh, I can't!"

"You don't have to be seen with me in town, if that's what you're afraid of. What about the Red Coach, in Ellison?"

Now she *was* frightened; no question of it. "No!" she said almost in a whisper, vehemently wagging her head. "Oh, no!"

We had reached the house where she boarded, and I pulled the car to the curb and sat frowning at her. Obviously I had set off a small explosion in her by suggesting she go out with me. Her lovely face was actually colorless, and I swear I could hear her heart thumping.

"All right," I said. "I only hoped—" But, of course, I could not tell her what I had really hoped: that by using the letter for an excuse to exchange ideas, I might get to know her better.

Frustrated, I slid out of the car and went around to open the door.

Only then did I become aware that Maude Parish, who owned the house, was leaning on a rake in the yard, watching me.

"Hello, Alan," Maude said in her boomy voice.

"Maude," I replied with a grin. "Still fighting the oak leaves?" This woman had been raking and burning for as long as I could remember, and I had walked this street on my way to grammar school. But despite the work they caused her, she loved the big red oaks in her yard. She herself was big, in both body and heart.

"Hi, Miss Thurston," Maude said.

Still pale and apparently still frightened, Sarah Thurston returned the greeting, thanked me for the lift, and fled into the house.

Maude gazed after her in surprise. "Now what was that all about? If it's not nosey of me to ask."

"I don't know."

She came closer and peered into my face. "You haven't been acting like a principal, I hope. Or, even worse, an assistant principal. Don't you get bossy with that young lady, Alan Woodring. I like her!"

"All I did was ask her to have dinner with me."

"Have dinner with you when?"

"Tonight."

"She goes home to Ellison every Friday evening. Stays for the weekend. Didn't you know that?"

Somehow, when talking with Maude Parish, I usually felt like a small boy being scolded—perhaps because she had scolded me rather often when I *was* small. With a touch of boyish belligerence I said now, "No, I didn't know, How could I?"

"Well, she's one of your teachers and . . . oh, all right. But she does. Every Friday without fail. Now does your pride feel better?"

It did, I had to admit to myself as I drove home. Still, Sarah's Friday trips to Ellison hardly explained her seeming panic. Why couldn't she simply have told me?

Besides, I thought, scowling at the memory, I had suggested having dinner at a restaurant *in* Ellison. So why couldn't she . . . why wouldn't she . . . what was the reason?

The answer must be that she just didn't want to go out with me. Anywhere. Or did the real answer have something to do with that letter I'd found?

During the week that followed, I kept an ear to the ground. Willow Hill High was no big-city school. A shock wave originating anywhere on the premises could be expected to reach all areas in a day or so.

I was puzzled when by midweek I had heard not even a lightweight rumor.

Sarah Thurston had drawn a blank, too, or claimed she had. When I questioned her on Thursday for the third time, she said with apparent impatience, "Don't you think we might be making a mountain out of a mere scrap of paper, Mr. Woodring? High-school girls do love to fantasize, you know."

"You can't believe this is mere fantasy," I protested.

"It could be. I've some kids in my English classes who can write the most way-out horror stories. I mean, you'd think they had never read anything but *Dracula* or *Frankenstein.*"

But she was not convincing. In the past few days I had come to know her better, and now I was convinced—wholly convinced—that she was shielding someone.

For one thing, she was unreasonably jumpy. When approached without warning, she all but leaped out of her lovely skin. And her nervousness seemed to increase each time I talked to her, though I did my level best to avoid any hint of accusation.

She acted—no getting around it—as though playing some perilous game that she knew could not go on much longer. Was there some significance, perhaps, in her mention of those two grisly horror novels, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein?*

Then, later that day, formidable Mrs. Kershaw marched herself into my office to confront me.

"Mr. Woodring!"

"Ah—yes, Mrs. Kershaw?" Not that I always knuckled under to her. But it was better, usually, to hear her out. If allowed to talk without interruption, she had a happy habit of becoming ensnared in her own irrationalities.

On tiptoe, because she resented not being tall, the assistant principal leaned over my desk to glare at me. "Mr. Woodring, have you no-

ticed anything peculiar about Sarah Thurston's behavior lately?"

"Sarah Thurston?" Now who, I hoped my tone implied, might Sarah Thurston be?

"Well, have you?" Kershaw demanded, not buying it.

"Anything peculiar?" My scowl, at least, was genuine. "Peculiar how?"

"As you know, Mr. Woodring, I try to keep an eagle eye on our new teachers."

A buzzard eye, I would have called it. But, solemnly, I nodded. "And?"

"There is something about Miss Thurston that makes me wonder. I can't put my finger on what's wrong. At least, not yet. But I will."

"I don't understand."

"Well, her mind isn't on teaching; I can tell you that much! When I walked into one of her English classes this morning, she wasn't even aware I had entered the room!"

Good heavens, I thought; the girl must have been in a coma, at least. "Really?" I said guardedly. "What was she doing, Mrs. Kershaw?"

"She wasn't doing *anything*. Just sitting at her desk, staring at a girl who was reading a poem. As if —well, as if she were in a trance, Mr. Woodring."

Trance. Coma. I felt something inside me twang like a plucked guitar string. "Staring at a girl, Mrs. Kershaw? Can you tell me the girl's name?"

"Of course, though I don't see how it can be important. She was Beryl Akers. You know her, I'm sure. She's to be Juliet in the school play."

I slowly nodded. Yes, indeed, I knew Beryl Akers. She was probably the prettiest senior in school, and the least inhibited.

"What poem was Beryl reading, Mrs. Kershaw? Do you know?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Because I didn't like it one little bit, and I demanded to see the paper she was reading from. Miss Thurston had given them an assignment to copy a favorite poem and bring it to class to read it."

"And Beryl was reading—?"

"A terrible thing about spells and such, that she said she got from a book on witchcraft."

I hiked an eyebrow at her. "Witchcraft?" I am a dedicated fantasy fan —have been since childhood—and, of course, witchcraft is a common ingredient of fantasy. The Silver John books of Manly Wade Wellman, one of my favorite authors, are full of it, for instance. "And Miss Thurston just sat there staring at Beryl while she read it?" I said.

"As if," Mrs. Kershaw grimly replied, "she were in a trance."

That evening I drove over to Maude Parish's house for an intended heart-to-heart talk with Sarah. But Sarah was not there.

"She left about six," Maude said. "The phone rang, I answered it, and this gravelly male voice said, 'Let me talk to the school teacher.' I called her, and when she finished talking to him she was white as a sheet. 'I can't stay for supper,' she said, 'I have to go out.'"

"Where did she go, Maude?"

"Alan, I don't know. To her funeral, from the looks of her."

Since I couldn't have a talk with Sarah, I'd better have one with Maude, I decided, and took her by the arm. "Come sit down," I commanded. When we were seated in her living room, I told about finding the letter. How long ago it seemed!

"And you think she's covering up for some girl in school?" Maude said, fiercely frowning.

"I do."

"Ha!" Derision made her voice even boomier than usual. "You don't know much about women, Alan Woodring; that's for sure. When Sarah Thurston came away from that telephone this evening, she was frightened for *herself*, not for someone else."

"Oh, come now."

"I mean it. You think I can't tell when a woman is truly scared? She was—"

"White as a sheet. You said that. It so happens she doesn't normally have a high color."

"Well, now, aren't we observing? I didn't know you paid that much attention to women. But I wasn't going to say she was white. Not again. If you don't mind, I was going to say she was petrified, just as she was one night three weeks ago when she got a call from home that her daddy had hurt himself again."

Thoroughly confused, I could only say, "What?"

"Her daddy uses a wheelchair. Didn't you know?"

I shook my head.

"Well, he does. He was in an accident a couple of years ago and lost the use of his legs."

"And hurt himself *again?* Is that what you said?"

"He was on their front veranda and lost control of the chair. It rolled down the steps with him."

"Three weeks ago?"

"Yes, three weeks ago. Or about. And when Sarah's mother telephoned about it—"

"I understand," I interrupted, aware that if I didn't get the conversation back on track I might end up almost anywhere. "But you're convinced Sarah was afraid for herself tonight. When the man called, I mean, and she went out."

"Absolutely."

"And this man who called didn't ask for her by name? Only for the school teacher?"

"'Let me talk to the school teacher.' That's what he said. A deep, gravelly voice, worse than mine."

I stood up. "Will you do something for me, Maude?"

"Yes. What?"

"Call me when Sarah returns. I'll be at home."

"Suppose she comes in late. Really late, I mean."

"Call me."

"All right," Maude promised. "I will."

Something deeply troubled me at this point. On the way home I went over our talk as best I could, trying to isolate the word or phrase responsible for my unease. But, of course, it was difficult to analyze any conversation with Maude.

At home I continued the struggle with no better luck. I lived with my father in the house in which I'd been born—my mother had died some years ago—but this evening my father was out of town. Alone, I paced the silent downstairs rooms, trying to recall what it was that Maude Parish had said.

Break it down, I told myself. She talked about the call from the man with the gravelly voice. About Sarah's obvious fright. About the other time Sarah had seemed frightened, when her father re-injured himself in his wheelchair.

Sarah was fond of her father. Obviously. I found myself nodding in approval, because old-fashioned values are strong in me. If Sarah loved her daddy—

Hold it. That word, *daddy*. Maude had used it, but it was certainly not a word she would have used unless Sarah had used it! Daddy. The letter. The fragment of a letter on the floor at school. "I pray that you and Daddy will understand . . ."

Nonsense. Most girls of high-school age called their fathers "daddy," didn't they? Many, at least.

But did many *women?*

I went to the phone, dialed Maude's number, and impatiently drummed a tattoo on the telephone table until she answered. "Maude. Alan. Tell me something. Does Sarah Thurston actually refer to her father as 'Daddy'?"

"What?"

"When you were telling me about his accident, you said she was upset when her *daddy* fell down—"

"Oh, that. Yes, she does, Alan. All the time. Why?"

"She hasn't come in yet?"

"Now, Alan, didn't I say I'd call you?"

"All right. I'll try not to climb the wall."

"When she comes in, I'll call you. I promise. No matter what time it is."

I made myself watch television, grimly changing channels every few minutes because nothing on the tube even slightly interested me. The phone failed to ring, and eventually, about 2 a.m., I must have dozed while numbly watching giant centipedes destroy New York, or was it Tokyo?

When I awoke, the living room was spooky with pale daylight, the TV was merely an oblong eye staring back at me, and I felt as though I had been sitting there for days.

After a shower, a change of clothes and some coffee, I felt the day was far enough along for me to call Maude. She sounded as worried as I felt.

"Sarah hasn't come in, Alan." The boomy voice was ragged with fatigue. "I stayed up till almost four, then left a note for her to wake me. But she isn't here. You think I ought to call her folks?"

I thought about it—not very brilliantly, I'm sure—and said at last, "No, not yet. They seem to have troubles enough. If she doesn't turn up at school, I'll give you a ring."

"I don't want anything to happen to that girl, Alan! I'm fond of her!"

So am I, I thought.

At school I was stared at, but whether it was because of my looks or my actions, I couldn't tell. I looked, I supposed, like someone who had sat all night in front of a TV set. As for my actions, instead of disappearing into my office as usual, I haunted the corridor by Sarah's room, becoming more and more edgy and conspicuous as time ran out and she failed to appear.

At the very last moment she arrived. Not the lovely young woman who normally came striding down the hall to face a roomful of admiring youngsters, but so nervous and troubled that she didn't even see me standing there as she hurried past.

I wanted to cry when I saw what just a few hours had done to her. If her door hadn't closed behind her, and if the corridor hadn't been full of the horribly final sound of a bell ringing, I surely would have run after her.

Shaking my hand, I went to my office, closed my own door, and turned to the filing cabinet. It took me only a few minutes to find a paper with Sarah Thurston's handwriting on it. I sat at my desk and stared at it, trying to recall what the writing on the fragment of a letter had looked like.

They were the same, I thought. Of course, I couldn't be certain without asking Sarah for the letter, but I had a pretty good mental picture of that piece of paper. And, yes, the writing was hers.

I sat there trying to think. How could I find out what was troubling her? By asking her? I had no right to ask her anything so personal.

What had the letter said? "I am sure to be talked about . . . so even if I am not actually told to leave school, I will have to go away."

It sounded so desperate. So final. And this morning, after last evening's phone call from the man with the unpleasant voice, she had *looked* desperate.

A thumping on my door jarred me out of my dark thoughts. Before I could say "Come in" the door opened and in marched Mrs. Kershaw, to plant herself in front of my desk and lean at me on her toes as she always did.

"Mr. Woodring!" There was shock in her voice. "Have you seen Sarah Thurston this morning?"

"Why, yes."

"I mean have you seen what she *looks* like?"

Mrs. Kershaw, I reminded myself with surprising ease, was, after all, only the assistant principal. Having so reminded and reassured myself, I at once felt better and said coolly,

"I believe Miss Thurston isn't feeling too well today, Mrs. Kershaw. Is there anything else you wished to see me about?"

But her gaze had gone like a dart to the paper on my desk. "What's this?" she demanded. "Why, it's—are you reviewing her job application?"

I could have kicked myself for not having swept the paper out of sight. "I was—ah—looking at it, Mrs. Kershaw. That's all. Just looking at it."

"Aha!"

"Miss Thurston is an excellent teacher. I assure you I'm not thinking—"

But the assistant principal had smelled something and was smiling, if her expression could be called a smile. With that look on her face, there was no point in my even finishing my declaration of innocence. Voicing a triumphant "Ha!" the lady marched out of my office with her shoulders bouncing.

"Damn," I said aloud.

But—back to the problem. How could I ask Sarah what was wrong? How could I help her?

The knock on my door this time was subdued, almost timid. Not Mrs. Kershaw again, obviously. I slid the job application into a drawer and said, "Come in."

The door opened and Sarah walked in. I glanced at the clock on the wall. She had a free period at this time. Rising, I said, "Good morning, Sarah. Please sit down," and knew the words were not right. She was—well, Maude Parish would have called it "white as a sheet"—and she was trembling. When she was seated, I lowered myself onto my own chair and said with almost no attempt to conceal my feelings, "Sarah, something's wrong, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Tell me about it."

"That's what I—" The phone on my desk silenced her. My "Damn!" was muttered silently this time as, with a look of apology, I picked up the instrument.

"Mr. Woodring"—it was the girl at the school switchboard—"there is a man on the line who won't give his name but says he has to talk to you. He says if you don't talk to him you'll be sorry."

"Put him on, Mildred."

The man had an unpleasant kind of voice. Gravelly, or rusty. "Hello. This Woodring?"

"This is Alan Woodring, yes."

"The high-school principal?"

"The principal. Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am. That's not important. I got something to tell you about one of your lady teachers."

Without meaning to, I glanced at Sarah and saw that she was even whiter than before as she gazed at me wide-eyed. She must have known the call was coming. I had the distinct impression she was about to—or at least, wanted to—leap out of her chair to tell me something before Rusty Voice could say it.

"If you have anything to tell me about a teacher of mine," I said angrily, "you'll have to say it to my face, not over the phone."

"I wasn't gonna tell you over the phone, Woodring. I'm gonna say it to you and her both, in person."

"You're coming here, you mean?"

"No. You two are meeting me."

"Interesting," I said. "And just where are we meeting you?"

"You know the old Rooster?" It had been a theater until about six months ago; then the town fathers had finally succeeded in closing it down. "I'll be in the parking lot in back in half an hour."

"Half an hour. And if we decide not to come?"

"What I know about your Sarah Thurston will be all over town by this time tomorrow. That's a promise, Woodring, and I keep my promises."

He hung up.

I hung up, too, and looked at Sarah. "I believe you know who that was," I said. "And I'm fairly sure you know what he wants to tell me.

You came here to tell me yourself, didn't you?" Before she could answer, I walked around the desk and took her hands. "How can I help, Sarah?"

With tears in her eyes she shook her head. "You can't. I'm resigning."

"Oh, no, you're not! Now please. Tell me what's wrong and let's see what we can do about it."

She said in a pale voice, "Do you know Ellison well, Mr. Woodring? Do you know a place called The Ramrod?"

I frowned. "It's a night club?"

"The kind now called an adult club." As she sat up a little straighter and looked at me, a glint of defiance crept into her gaze. "I sing there Saturday nights."

After a little silence I said quietly, "I see."

"I don't think so. You've never been to such a club, have you?"

"No, but—"

"I'd be surprised if you had. I sing at The Ramrod because Wally Stanford, the owner, knows my father. They played together in one of the big dance bands once. And he was kind enough to let me try my luck. And I was lucky. Very lucky, considering how badly we need the extra money since Daddy was hurt. The patrons like my singing. But I'm sure you realize that most of the girls working there are not—not school teachers."

She had a good voice for singing, I thought. It could be low and troubled, as when she had begun this conversation, or quiver with emotion, or ring like crystal." "You know something? I'd like to hear you sing."

"One of Wally's regular customers," she went on, apparently not even hearing my remark, "decided that since I worked in such a place I must be—available. He began writing me letters."

"This fellow with the scratchy voice?"

"Yes."

"You were using your own name there?"

"I didn't think I had anything to be ashamed of." Her voice was defiant again. "Anyway, he only asked, at first. Then he demanded. Then he threatened to expose me—that's the word he used—unless I agreed to meet him."

"Meet him where?"

"At that X theater—whatever they're called—that was closed down here a while ago. The Rooster."

"I'm to meet him there in twenty minutes," I said, glancing at my watch. "He must have a thing about that place. What did he say on the phone last night that distressed you so much?"

"He said he was out of patience. If I didn't meet him, he'd get me fired this morning."

"Obviously you didn't meet him. Where did you go? Home?"

She nodded. "To talk to Daddy."

"I've never met your father, but I'll bet I know what he said. It must have been something like, 'If I were not in this miserable wheelchair, I'd meet that phony Romeo for you.'"

Her smile was only fleeting, but it changed her whole face for a second. "He called it a 'blasted' wheelchair," she corrected.

"Did you really consider running away? Leaving home? I mean, in your letter, the one you dropped in the corridor, you said—"

"I suppose I did, or thought I did. I wasn't making much sense at that point, was I? I should have foreseen that if I decided to give up my job here and go away, I wouldn't just send my folks a letter; I'd go to them and *explain* the situation—as I did last night." Suddenly she was staring at me again. "But now we're back where we started, aren't we? I do have to give up my job."

"Do you?"

"Can't you imagine the reaction in Willow Hill when he starts talking? And he will. He made that clear on the phone last night. Not only will he talk; he'll make it seem a hundred times worse than—"

"He has to talk to me first, Sar-

ah," I said, rising. "You go to Maude Parish's and wait for me." I had no intention of obeying the fellow's order to bring Sarah with me.

"No." She shook her head.

"I'll just tell Mrs. Kershaw to take over here."

"Alan, no. I don't want to go to Maude's. I want to go with you."

"Well—"

"I want to confront him."

"Well," I said again, reluctantly, "all right."

But almost at once I had a frightening premonition that I was making a terrible mistake.

The Rooster was not in the town itself but on a little-used road at the outskirts, because when building it the theater people had known there would be complaints unless they practically hid it in the woods. Sarah and I were a few minutes late driving into the old, cracked parking lot at the rear, and another car was already there.

A man wearing dark glasses wriggled out of it and puffed himself up like a fat pigeon as he waddled toward us.

"So you came," he said in his gravelly voice.

I shrugged. "We're here, but not for what you probably expect. We're here to remind you that you've written some incriminating letters, and if they were to appear in our local newspaper you'd look pretty small."

Standing there with his hands in his jacket pockets, he glared at me: a big, thick-necked man about 40 years old. His jacket was an expensive one, dark gray, and so were the matching slacks he wore with it. "Small?" he said. The word was spoken so quietly it sounded like an echo.

"In case you don't know it," I said, "people in general dislike injustice and are full of compassion. Given a choice in this situation, they'll side with the school teacher who sings in a questionable night club to help her injured father, rather than with a lecher like you."

He leered at the woman beside me. "And you buy that, do you, Miss Thurston?"

Sarah stepped closer to me and said, "Yes, I do."

"Woodring," the fellow snarled, shifting his gaze back to me, "if you tried anything as stupid as that, you'd find things out about me you don't even suspect. Let's pretend you didn't threaten me. Just leave this woman here and drive back to your school."

"Let me remind you," I said, "that the editor of our newspaper is a deacon in his church. No way could you buy him off."

"Oh?" His smile was such that I longed to tear it from his face and grind it into the asphalt.

"So I repeat what I said. If you go ahead with this and try to ruin Miss Thurston's reputation as you've threatened, the one who gets hurt will be you. That's what we came here to tell you, and now that it's been said we'll leave."

"Except for this," he replied, "which says you won't." And suddenly his right hand was out of its jacket pocket and there was a small blue gun in it.

Something icy dribbled down my spine, and I heard the woman beside me draw in a quick, sharp breath. Neither of us had anticipated anything like this.

"Turn around, both of you"—the voice was gravelly again—"and walk over to the side door of the theater. Walk slow."

I looked at Sarah and she reached for my hand. It wasn't possible that this was happening. Such things were unheard of in Willow Hill. As we walked toward the old, abandoned building, I looked toward the road in desperate hope of seeing a car come along. But no car had passed since our arrival, and none was likely to. The only sound I heard was the slow scuffing of our own reluctant feet.

We reached the door. "Open it, Woodring," the man with the gun said.

I opened it. Enough light entered to show me a theater screen looming above me on my right, and curved rows of seats slanting upward to the front of the building on my left.

"Go in and walk up the aisle real slow, Woodring, single file with you first. One stupid move and I'll make it a walk to the graveyard for you both."

I had to let go of Sarah's hand, and it was icy cold, trembling, when I did so. Hating myself for not knowing how to turn the tables on this sneering monster, I went up the aisle like a man walking to his execution. Behind me a light-switch clicked and the door thudded shut. Only a few lights went on in the theater, however. Only enough to give me the creepy feeling that the rows of seats were occupied by an army of ghosts staring at the screen.

The ghostly army dissolved into two flesh-and-blood figures—two men—who rose silently and came toward me.

"Where you want 'em, Akers?" one said.

"In the storeroom."

"Okay." A heavy hand fell on my shoulder. "Let's go, Woodring."

He marched me to the top of the aisle and to the left past a door marked LADIES. At the next door, which was unmarked, his fingers squeezed my shoulder and he said, "Hold it." Sarah and the other man were so close behind us that I could hear them breathing. Then the man called Akers, from the parking lot, stepped past us and opened the door and switched on a light inside.

I was shoved in and Sarah was pushed in after me so hard that she stumbled. While Gravel Voice held the gun on us, the other two took rope from a shelf and bound our wrists behind us. Then they forced us to the floor and bound our ankles. "That'll hold 'em, Akers," said the man working on me as he rose to his feet.

Akers, I thought. Somewhere I had heard that name before. But I didn't know the man, I was certain, nor did I know the others. One was in his early twenties, dark-haired, clean-shaven, wearing jeans and a blue work shirt. He looked as though he ought to be driving a tractor on a farm, with good clean sunlight shining on his handsome face. The other was a few years older with a sallow, pimply, weak-eyed face that looked as though it were made of maggoty soft cheese.

Akers stood over us as we lay there on the floor, bound hand and foot. "Would you like to know why you're here?" he said, with the leer that I so fiercely wanted to tear off his face.

"Whether we do or not, you're going to tell us, aren't you?" I said. "You have to gloat or there's no pleasure in it. So go ahead."

"Our service tomorrow night calls for a virgin. We don't always require virgins. But once a year, for this special ceremony, we do."

"So you picked a woman who sings in a bawdy night club?"

"We know the kind of woman she was, Woodring. And how to get her, when we found her working there at the club. The very person who discovered her there—my own daughter—was in her English class at your school."

My mind clicked and I had it. Akers. Beryl Akers, the pretty girl who was to play Juliet in the school play. The same Beryl Akers who, in Sarah's class, had read aloud a poem from a book on witchcraft—according to Mrs. Kershaw, "a terrible thing about spells and such."

"So," said Beryl Akers's father, still leering down at me, "I simply looked into Miss Thurston's background. And after learning about her crippled father and her need for money, I decided she was available."

"Akers—" the man with the maggoty-cheese face was scowling at a watch on his wrist—"will you quit this and leave us get this guy's car out of here? If Brother Blake's to have

it apart before anyone starts lookin' for it, he has to have it quick."

"We're leaving," Akers told him. "Soon as you gag these two so they won't wake up the county."

Cheese Face and Farm Boy took some already prepared strips of sheeting from a shelf and did a thorough job of gagging us, then hurried out. Following them, Akers paused at the door.

"Until tomorrow evening, then," he said with his leer, and put the light out before closing the door.

I'm not a brave man, certainly I'm no hero, and have to confess that the next few hours were all but unendurable. Had the two of us been able to talk to each other, I might have felt less desperate. But the gags prevented that, and the stygian darkness of the storeroom kept us from even talking with our eyes.

Time crawled by. I had no way of measuring its passage. Though my watch had luminous hands, they were of no help because with my wrists lashed behind my back I couldn't see them. All I could do was lie there and wonder what was in store for us.

A service, Akers had said. One that required a woman who was a virgin. What kind of "service" and who would be in attendance? What kind of people *were* Akers and his followers—if, indeed, he was the leader as I suspected?

From time to time we did attempt to communicate, but it was hopeless. The only signals we were capable of sending each other were muffled moaning sounds that barely got through our gags. It let each of us know the other was alive, but little more than that. Then after what seemed a lifetime of aimless non-thinking, I began trying to recall how some of the fictional characters I had read about had got themselves out of dilemmas such as this.

Try working your feet to loosen the ropes at your ankles, I told myself, and struggled for at least an hour. But all I got out of it was a torment in both legs that climbed all the way to my knees.

Try it with your arms, I thought—and that didn't work either. All I achieved was a flow of warm, sticky blood on my wrists where the unyielding ropes rubbed them raw.

Still another idea filtered through my misery. If I could reach *Sarah's* bonds . . .

It was painful, wriggling over the floor with my feet bound and hands tied behind me, but I finally made contact and then simply lay there for a few minutes, comforted by the warmth of her. How wonderful, I thought, if we could be doing this at a happier time, in surroundings of our own choice, with our arms and lips free of these hellish restrictions.

But when I tried my utmost to worry her wrist-ropes loose with my fingers, I couldn't budge them.

Time dragged on, and my fears increased with each hour's passing. The night had to be over, I told myself. Then the day that followed. At long last I heard the muffled sound of a car outside in the parking lot. Then another. And in the next fifteen minutes or so, at least a dozen more.

I was still lying with my back to Sarah, my hands touching her bound wrists. She moved a little and her fingers found mine. They were cold. They trembled. And I clung to them and tried to tell her through my gag that I loved her and she must be brave. But I was weak with dread myself.

The door opened. The light clicked on, almost blinding me after so long in total darkness. Akers and Farm Boy and Cheese Face walked in and stood there gazing down at us. I swear Cheese Face licked his flabby lips in anticipation. Two women came in. Wearing plain white cotton dresses, both were middle-aged and overweight and ugly.

One stepped past the men and

creakily lowered herself to one knee beside Sarah. "She has soiled herself. She must be immaculate for our service tonight."

"Take her to the ladies' room and clean her up, then," Akers growled.

The women untied Sarah's ankles and pulled her to her feet. "Come!" one said angrily, and they led her from the room, she barely able to walk after being so long trussed up. Akers scowled down at me.

"You, too, have to be clean." He turned to Cheese Face and Farm Boy. "Take him to the men's room."

With my ankles freed, I was hauled to my feet and marched to the door. When I stepped from the prison in which Sarah and I had spent a night and the day just ending, I heard a low hum and buzz of conversation and saw people sitting in the theater: thirty or so men and women of all ages, even a few children. Only a few of the theater's lights were on, but as I was led along to the men's room I saw that a kind of crude stage had been set up in front of the screen. On it was a low wooden table the size of a cot. And beside that—God help me—was a smaller, taller table on which lay something that glittered.

A knife—with a foot-long blade.

My two guardians hauled me into the men's room, where Farm Boy warningly aimed a gun at me while Cheese Face untied my wrists. "Strip," the older man ordered. "Wash yourself!"

You think of the strangest things when terrified, I discovered. Instead of wondering what they intended to do with me—and, of course, with Sarah—I found myself wondering how water and electricity were still available in this old theater when it had been shut down for so long. Here in the men's room I was aware of a sound I had not heard before, coming from just outside. A small diesel power plant? It could be, I guessed. And that would explain the water, too, for the source of the water out here must be a well, with probably an electric pump.

I stood there naked in front of a wash basin, ran it full of water, and was glad enough to wash myself, if only because it was postponing whatever was to happen next. The water was cold and even seemed to clear my mind somewhat. I gazed into the mirror above the basin. Was there some way I could get the gun away from Farm Boy? Some sudden move I might make?

I knew there wasn't. He was young and alert. Why, damn it, couldn't Cheese Face be the one with the weapon? A sudden leap at *him* and I might be able to snatch the gun away from him.

"All right, you're clean," Farm Boy said. "Quit stalling and come on!"

Naked and still wet, I turned from the wash basin and walked to the door.

"To your right."

I turned in that direction, with the two of them holding my arms. When we got to the side aisle they steered me down it, all the way to the front row. Every eye in the place was on me, and there was no more buzz and hum of voices, only a terrifying silence.

"Sit."

I was pushed down onto the end seat in the first row, and while Farm Boy held the gun on me, his pasty-faced companion knelt and tied first my legs to the metal understructure of the seat, then my wrists to the seat's wooden arms. No way, unless I suddenly acquired the strength of Superman, would I be able to get loose to interfere with whatever was about to happen here.

What that was had to do with the table on the platform in front of the screen, I saw. On it now was a figure under a white sheet that concealed its identity.

Sarah?

I stared at her helplessly for a while, then turned to survey the people in the audience. Several of them I recognized as residents of Willow Hill. The others were strangers.

One of them stood up now, as Farm Boy and Cheese Face moved away from me, leaving me alone. Advancing to the stage, he climbed onto it by means of movable wooden steps and strode across it to the table where the sheeted figure lay.

Akers. And he wore now a long black robe with, on the front of it, a large red circle made up of two embroidered snakes swallowing each other's tails.

He raised his arms above his head and spread them wide. "Let us begin," he said. "My daughter Beryl will read to us."

The girl from school followed him onto the stage with a large red book in her hands. Barefoot and beautiful, she was all in white with a wreath of gardenias about her head. Opening the book, she began to read.

It was a poem and a long one, having to do with witchcraft and demons and paying homage to the devil. Was it the same one she had read in class that day when Sarah, according to Mrs. Kershaw, had listened to her in a trance?

Anyway, she read it slowly in a high, clear voice that soon, I knew, would be reciting Shakespeare's lines for Juliet. What a travesty! And when she was finished, her father stepped to the table and flung aside the white sheet that covered the person lying there.

Sarah. Sarah naked, on her back, with her wrists lashed behind her head to metal rings at the head of the table and her long, pale legs spread wide and her ankles lashed to another pair of rings at the table's foot. I could not see her face from where I sat, but I saw that she was still gagged—as I was—and knew she must be all but paralyzed with fear. Akers, kneeling, drew from under the table a wooden box.

I believe I knew what was coming. Or sensed, at least, after the girl's reading of the poem and what had been said about Sarah's being a virgin, that I was about to witness a sacrifice of some sort. A kind of black fury swept into my mind and I struggled with might and main to break loose from my bonds. But Cheese Face had done too good a job on me. My frantic efforts only burned more skin off my wrists and ankles and nearly drowned me in my own sweat.

Akers stood there on the platform with the box in his hands now, facing an audience so still, so tense with expectation, that it resembled a gathering of ghosts. "We will now draw the name of the man who is to be our Devil for the ceremony," he intoned in his raspy voice. "Daughter, come and draw." Turning, he held the box out to her.

She approached and with her left hand covering her eyes, thrust her right hand into the box, stirred its contents around for a few seconds, and drew out a wad of paper. She handed the paper to her father. He unfolded it and peered at it.

"This year's Devil is Lennox Latham!"

I saw a man stand up in the fourth row, and recognized him at once. He was the one who had bound me to my chair, the one with the sallow, pimply, weak-eyed face that looked as though it were made of maggoty soft cheese. Oh my God, I thought, not he! Of them all, not that one! But he was already on his way down the aisle to the platform. He climbed onto it, eagerly peeling off his shirt as he did so.

In another moment he stood there naked beside the leader, hungrily licking his lips as he looked back over his shoulder at the naked woman on the table.

You could have heard a fly walk on the ceiling of the theater at that moment. The silence was like a fog.

"For the benefit of our guests and any new members among us," Akers said, turning his head to look at me, "let me explain that once each year it is our duty to provide the Devil with a virgin bride. We draw lots to decide which of our male members will

deflower her in Satan's name before she is sacrificed. Am I understood?"

A sound of murmuring dispersed the silence, like a bubble of black oil welling up through clean water. It swelled. The bubble became bigger and spread out to fill the theater from wall to wall.

"Very well," Akers said. "Stand-in for Satan, you may proceed!"

Cheese Face lurched around. Apparently racked by the enormity of his lust, he swayed as he groped his way to the table. I saw Sarah turn her head to look at him. I saw the look in her wide-open eyes as she struggled in vain to free herself. I, too, was struggling again, with no more success than before.

I had to do something to stop this! But what?

An idea. Not much of one but a glimmer, like a faint spot of light seen by a man lost in a cavern and doomed to die there unless he can find a way out. Maybe some heroes I had read about in my pursuit of fantasy fiction would have been able to free themselves and go on a rampage, slam some heads together, tear the place apart . . . something like that. Robert E. Howard's Conan, for instance. Karl Edward Wagner's mighty Kane. But not I.

Yet these people believed in witchcraft. The reading of the poem was proof of that. And my mind locked on Manly Wade Wellman and his Silver John the Balladeer.

Silver John, who in Wellman's wonderful novel, *After Dark,* shattered the spell of the evil Shonokins with a spell of his own. I must have read that part of *After Dark* a dozen times. I knew John's spell by heart.

But wait. How could I know that Wellman himself hadn't made up that spell? Silver John when using it says it came from a book of his called *The Long Lost Friend.* But what if Wellman had made up the book too? Dear God, the whole thing might be just an author's trick. Authors play such tricks. There never was a real *Necronomicon,* despite H. P. Lovecraft's many references to it.

But it was all I could think of, and there was no time left. Cheese Face was at the table. His hands were already on Sarah's pale thighs. He slavered at the mouth as he leaned toward her.

I couldn't shout out John's spell; the gag I wore prevented that. All I could do was think it with all my might, a thunder in the mind. Here goes, I thought, and God help us!

It *was* thunder in my mind, the way I did it. I thought my skull would split. But I did it and survived, and only a little did I change the words Manly Wellman put into the mouth of his Silver John. Only enough to fit the present situation.

"Like unto the blessed cup and the wine, given unto the holy saints, may we be guarded and defended that no serpent bite us, no wild beast tear us, no weapons hurt us, and that no fiends, no witchcraft, no enchantment harm us. Amen!"

Can I make you believe what happened then? No, probably not. But it did. I swear to you it did.

The ropes at my wrists and ankles moved as though alive. Slithering like snakes, they untied themselves and fell to the floor smoking. Up on the platform the same thing happened to the ropes holding Sarah, and when they fell to the wooden platform they not only smoked but set the platform on fire. And then a sound like that of a great howling wind filled the air, as though a hurricane had been unleashed inside the theater. I didn't *feel* any wind, mind you, but I heard the noise of one, and it rose to an ear-splitting shriek. And the building began to shake and tremble and rock. Yes, it did. As though some giant hand had reached down and grabbed hold of it in a fury.

Up on the platform the naked man with the cheesy face, who had won the honor of being Satan for the ceremony, reeled away from the table with his hands outflung as though to

keep that screeching wind from tearing him to pieces. His feet missed the edge of the platform and he went crashing down onto the front row of seats. And the man named Akers threw his hands out toward off the tornado and leaped after him, followed by his daughter. And by that time, every living soul in the place was up and running.

They tore up the aisles, too scared even to yell as they fled. Some of them fell and had to pick themselves up again. Some of the slower ones got trampled and very nearly didn't make it back to their feet. Only once before in my life had I seen anything like it, and that was a time when a sudden storm broke out at a crowded country fairgrounds, and a terrible shaft of lightning shattered a ferris wheel that had just unloaded twenty or thirty people. But those people were running from a danger they understood. These were fleeing in sheer panic from a thing they *didn't* comprehend and were in mortal fear of.

By the time I reached Sarah the theater was empty and that awful wind-shriek had begun to abate. I could hear cars starting up outside and roaring away at top speed out of the parking lot. And the building was on fire. Flames licked at us as we jumped together from the platform. The screen behind us was ablaze right up to the roof.

We fled together to the side door through which we'd been forced into that hellish place, and found ourselves in the parking lot, and the lot was empty. The last car to leave was just disappearing down the road. Still naked, we fled out to the road and stopped there, breathless, and looked back.

That theater of the damned was ablaze from one end to the other, hurling black smoke a hundred feet into the fiery sky. And though we were naked, I didn't care—I turned to Sarah Thurston and took her in my arms and held her close until she stopped trembling. And then I said, "Sarah, we have to walk to the nearest house. Then we have to tell whoever lives there what happened, so they'll let us phone Maude Parish to come and get us. Are you able to do that?"

She said she was, and we did it. And we were fortunate, for when we had walked about a quarter mile along that road, we came to a place where people from the town disposed of their rubbish. Poking around by the light of a rising moon, we found an old coat and blanket to wrap around ourselves before reaching the house. So we didn't startle its occupants as much as we might have.

And, of course, Maude Parish came for us at once when we phoned her.

I went to the police next day about those people at the theater. Sarah went with me, and we told them just what had happened, and who some of the participants were. Willow Hill's chief of police is a stodgy sort of man, however. And though he promised to investigate, nothing has yet come of it. The fire that destroyed the Rooster Theater was officially blamed on vandals.

So these people may still be holding their "services" somewhere and perhaps someday will try again to use Sarah in one of them, though I deeply doubt it after what happened to them at the Rooster. But if they do decide to risk it, Sarah has me now and I have Manly Wade Wellman and his Silver John.

We're not afraid.

Menacing Mail

I wanted to write you to let you know how much I enjoyed *Shudder Stories #2*. I liked the Hugh B. Cave story, but "Hall of the Devil-Flag" by Carl Jacobi was a really great tale, the best in the issue and very well done. It had a nice dash of mystery, mysticism, oriental lore, occult, and all kinds of good stuff. The article on "The Macho Mags" was pretty good—perhaps Mr. Wexler could do a companion piece on the old shudder pulps themselves for you?

Gary Lovisi
Brookly, NY

I just read your *Shudder Stories*, first issue. *Really* great, wonderful stuff; the world *needs* a horror/supernatural pulp.

Kate Kristie
Madison, WI

I was particularly amused to find none other than Justin Case himself on the loose as a character in "Brides of the Blood-Fiend from Hell" [*Shudder Stories* #2]. Next I suppose he'll team up with Sam Walser in "Six-Gun Hell-Cat from Black River." I can't wait.

Your usual entertaining blend of interesting artifacts and new fiction. Keep up the good work.

Karl Edward Wagner
Chapel Hill, NC

Would any reader of *Shudder Stories* be able to help us out? The licentious library here in the editor's Secret Chamber is missing two volumes, and we would be interested in obtaining them. Could you bear to part with copies of Robert Weinberg's *Weird Menace #1* and his *Pulp Classics #13* ("Death Orchids")? Please write us here at *Shudder Stories* and suggest a price.

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"The Gallery of the Goddesses" by Robert Kenneth Jones
"The Hand of Every" by Carl Jacobi
"Damsels for the Damned" by Hugh B. Cave
Cover art by Allen Koszowski
Interior art by Jeff Dee

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